

The Forgotten Spartan

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Summary: The story of the First Spartan I

1. Chapter 1

PROLOGUE

0800 Hours, December 17, 2514(Military Calendar)

/Epsilon Eridani System, planet Reach

**UNSC Priority Transmission **

076452B-74

**Encryption Code: **Red

**Public Key: **file/access Delta

**From: **ONI Section Three

**To: **Dr. Catherine Halsey M.D., Ph.D., Civilian

Consultant (CIN: 10141-026-SRB4695)

**Subject: **SPARTAN/Approval

**Classification: **Restricted

Start File/

Dr. Halsey,

Project SPARTAN green lighted. Any recruit you request will be yours.

CHAPTER ONE

****1700 Hours December 17, 2524 (Military Calendar)****

****Epsilon Eridani System, ONI Medical Facility, in ****

****Orbit around Planet Reach****

The medical bays doors opened, and Dr. Catherine Halsey walked into the room. She was wearing a tailored lab coat, with her hair was in a tight bun; in her hand she carried a small data pad. There were twenty modified Cryopods connected to various tubes and sensors. The Doctor's heels clicked loudly on the tile floor as she walked towards the pods. The man in the pod on the far left stumbled out and fell on his hands and knees, his head was shaved bald, but the short stubble growing was a distinct brown. His physique was perfect, "Good" she said to her self as she turned to face him.

The man started to choke and his hands slipped. He fell on his face and started vomiting, he seemed to have no control over his body, and was now twitching rapidly. The technicians around started to come to his aid, but Dr. Halsey held them back with a wave of her hand. She watched as his shaking slowed, and he managed to wipe off his mouth.

"Congratulations, Lieutenant," she said to him, seemingly pleased, "You're the only survivor." As she said this he twisted his neck upward and looked at her, then rest his head on the vomit-strewn floor, and slipped into unconsciousness.

****0800 Hours December 27, 2524 (Military Calendar)****

****Epsilon Eridani System, Hawthorne Medical Facility, ****

****Planet Reach****

First Lieutenant Matthew Simmons awoke on a hospital bed. His vision was blurred, but he could see that he was hooked up to several machines and I.V.s. Outside the room's window was Dr. Halsey conversing with another doctor. Simmons marveled at her intelligence, she was the reason he agreed to be in this program at all. The woman was brilliant, and there was something unexplainable that attracted Simmons to her. His thoughts were interrupted by Halsey's entrance.

" How are you Lieutenant?" She asked.

"Fine," he replied. They both new this was a lie, Simmons was in immense pain, his bones ached, all his muscles seemed torn, and he could barely move.

" Of course you are," she said mockingly, " You have been given command of an ODSST Platoon on Richter VII, I think you will enjoy it." Simmons knew that would be trouble. Orbital Drop Shock Troopers were the finest units the Marines had, and they didn't take to kindly to fresh meat, either. But what had Halsey said? If he survived the augmentation, which he did, he would be physically altered to have "physical prowess to the likes of which he could not imagine". Being hardly able to move, though, was something he could imagine.

" You will make a full recovery within the week, then you will be

transferred to Richter VII aboard the destroyer _Cherokee_" Halsey told him.

" A week!" Simmons shouted, Halsey was not startled at all, " I'm not waiting a week," he told her, as he pulled the I.V.s from his arms, unconnected the machines, and stood up.

" I would really advise more rest," Halsey told him.

" And I would really advise you stow it ma'am, I'm leaving."

" Doctor's orders," she said Defiantly

" You're a civilian, I am a Marine," he told her as he strode out of the room

" You may be a Marine," Dr. Halsey said softly " but more importantly, you're a Spartan."

2. Chapter 2

Chapter Two

****0800 Hours January 3, 2525 (Military Calendar)****

****Aboard UNSC Destroyer _Cherokee _en route to ****

****Richter VII****

Simmons had made a "full recovery"all right. He could run over 50 KPH, and he had always been a slow runner before. He could also lift around eight hundred pounds. Everything seemed slow to him, too, like he was watching the world at half-speed. He marveled at his muscle mass and reflexes. He went to the gym aboard the _Cherokee _every day, went down to the section that was rotating at two Gs and would work out for hours. He also studied tactics and reviewed ancient battles; he would be ready to lead his platoon for sure. The only thing that bothered him about his new life was the fact that he was alone; he was the only survivor. He wished some of the others had survived. His best friend from the academy had been in the pod next to him, Dr. Halsey said the augmentation went too fast, and his brain over-loaded from all the change. She also said she was happy with the results. How? Nineteen men died, one survived, how were those good results? The Doctor must have had her reasons, she always did, but Simmons did not know what her reasons for this could have been, how had she helped humanity at all? Simmons pondered this for days, he refused to go into cryo, and was therefore left with nothing to do but think, work out and dread the day they would arrive at Richter VII.

On the day they were scheduled to arrive on Richter VII Simmons went to visit Major Sullivan, he was the executive officer of the Battalion of ODSTs stationed on the _Cherokee. _Sullivan had been a professor at the Marine Academy At Quantico on Earth, and taught Simmons for two years. Simmons wanted to ask him for advice on how to lead the hostile men in his charge; he wanted advice you couldn't get in a book. As he took the elevator to the Major's quarters he contemplated why the man had given up his teaching post for field duty, was he itching for combat, or sick of fresh officers asking him

for advice on Marine life? He hoped it was the first one as he knocked on the Major's door.

" Enter," said a grizzly voice, Simmons remembered it as the Major's. He opened the door and walked in. Sullivan had put in wood paneling and pictures of ODSs and Pelican Dropships were hanging on the wall. It smelled of smoke, which was of course against regulations, but if anyone dared tell that to the Major, they would regret it during their Hospital stay. The Major's voice wasn't the only thing grizzly about him, he was 6'5, all muscle and looked as though he weighed three hundred pounds, At first Simmons felt threatened, then he remembered that he could lift Sullivan over his head and throw him through the door, and he straightened up. Sullivan was looking over a data pad, then looked up at Simmons, he had a scar streaking down his left cheek that was not there when he left Quantico, his once slick black hair now contained streaks of gray. He had aged a lot since he had been transferred to the _Cherokee_ and made over a dozen drops into rebel territory.

" Can I help you, Lieutenant?" He said, glancing over his data pad once more

" I hope so, Sir," Simmons said sheepishly "I was hoping for advice on leadership, now that I am going to lead a platoon of my own, Sir." Sullivan dropped his data pad and got up from his desk, and walked around Simmons, surveying him, he stopped in front of him; he apparently liked what he saw.

" I've heard things about you Simmons. Men say you can do inhuman things, Hell, I've heard stories that you can lift eight hundred pounds, what do you have to say about that?"

" Nothing, Sir," Simmons knew that project SPARTAN was classified.

" So you admit it then?" the Major said inquisitively.

" I have changed since the academy, Sir" Simmons said hoping the Major would change subjects, he did.

" So you want advice, eh? Well I'll tell you one thing Simmons, show them who boss, remind them it's you, not their Sergeant, you, can you do that?" the Major asked him.

" Yes, Sir, I can." Simmons told him.

" Good, then you're dismissed, Lieutenant" Simmons saluted Sullivan and exited the room. Show them who's boss? This was the Marine Corps; his men should already know who's boss. But Simmons made a note of the advice anyway, hoping he wouldn't have to use it.

Simmons packed his things into a duffel bag, and then slipped into his uniform. He placed his Standard Issue M6C Magnum in its holster, picked up his bag and walked to the hangar. The _Cherokee_ would get in orbit around Richter VII and Simmons' Pelican Drop ship would go down to the surface on its own. The planet was in such chaos with the recent rebel insurgency, Simmons thought this was a bad idea, one drop ship would be an easy target for rebel anti aircraft.

He walked into the _Cherokee's_ Hangar and looked around, there were three pelicans and only five Longsword Fighters, a small force

compared to what most UNSC ships carried. He walked to the middle Pelican, which was being prepped for takeoff, he saw three men talking at the rear of the ship, and walked towards them. One of them was the pilot, the name Charles was stitched on his helmet and flight suit. There was a lighting bolt stenciled on his left sleeve, the insignia of the 36th Naval Air Squadron. They were famous for making their drops faster than anyone else. Good, their pilot was assured to be talented at evasive maneuvers, they would need that. The pilot was talking to an ODST named O'Donnell; he was a lance corporal, but he didn't seem the ODST type; he wore a casual grin, and his physique was less-than-stunning, but he seemed intrigued when Simmons arrived.

" You the Lieutenant goin' down to the surface?" the pilot asked.

" Yes, I am," Simmons told him. Next the third man, a colonel, spoke up

" Then I believe we are ready to takeoff, Warrant Officer," the senior officer told the pilot. Simmons could not believe he had not realized the man was an officer, and snapped a quick salute, which the colonel returned, seemingly indifferent to the breach in etiquette. The Warrant Officer walked into the cockpit of the drop ship, and the Colonel and O'Donnell strapped themselves into their crash seats, Simmons followed suit and two Maintenance personnel shut the back hatch, which hissed violently, signaling atmospheric pressurization. A voice came from the cockpit, seemingly the copilot's,

" Welcome to UNSC flight 4311, one way to Richter VII, there will be no in-flight movie, no in-flight meal, and no stewardess onboard. We hope you enjoy your flight." Even through the COM system's distortion, the copilot's tone was unmistakably mocking.

As it echoed through the back of the drop ship the Lance Corporal cracked a smile, it quickly faded away, as the drop ship entered Richter VII's atmosphere, and the Pelican started shaking violently.

"We are now experiencing some turbulence, if there was a seat belt sign it would be turned on, so don't get up," the copilot shouted back to them. O'Donnell turned to Simmons and looked inquisitively.

" Something wrong, Lance Corporal?" Simmons asked him.

" No, Sir, it's just I believe you've been assigned to my unit, Sir," O'Donnell told him; he had a thick Scottish accent.

" Well I believe you're correct, but I don't think that's what's bothering you," Simmons told him. O'Donnell had thick brown hair, and his nose appeared to have been broken several times.

" Well, I just, I've heard stories, Sir. I was in cryo the whole time, but people tell me you work out like a machine, that you go to two G's and lift for hours, no one can do that, Sir" O'Donnell shouted to him, over the roar of the Pelican's engines, he seemed to be bursting a bubble inside him, and his feelings flowed uncontrollably, a bad sign in a Marine, let alone an ODST.

" Well I won't lie to you, O'Donnell, I am not weak, and yes I did work out many times this past voyage, but I don't believe I am a machine." Simmons said flatly, O'Donnell looked satisfied, but Simmons knew he wasn't. The turbulence stopped, and the Pelican ride became smoother. The copilot's voice sounded again, " We are about thirty minutes out, and will begin taking evasive maneuvers in ten minutes, if we survive, it should stop in about five minutes." Simmons hoped he was joking. He wasn't. They heard flak blast around them, the Pelican moved nimbly between it. The pilot was certainly talented, and he seemed to be so in control that he could will the flak out of their way. Simmons admired this. He wondered if his brother, a member of the Twenty-Third Naval Air Squadron, was this good. His brother had been a pilot for three years, and knew nothing of Simmons' status as a Spartan. Neither did his uncle, Captain of the UNSC frigate Antitem. Simmons could never tell them about SPARTAN, but he knew if they met in person, they would be suspicious.

The flak stopped and the ride became smoother, Simmons estimated another fifteen minutes until they reached Camp Ulysses, where he was stationed. Simmons dreaded the landing, he wasn't fully prepared to meet his platoon, and the Major's advice didn't help. But Simmons knew it would come, and tried to occupy him self with his duffel bag, which had become loose. He reattached it to its hook, then looked at its contents, his spare uniform, clips for his sidearm, and a data pad of information on his platoon. He turned it on and glanced over their service records, O'Donnell's was last, it seemed he was to lead Simmons demolitions squad, O'Donnell didn't seem that type, but Simmons knew not to question HighCom assignments.

The Pelican touched down at Camp Ulysses, and the three men exited the back hatch, after being quickly refueled, the Pelican took off. The Colonel walked towards the camp's Headquarters and O'Donnell started walking towards his barracks, where the rest of Simmons platoon was. Simmons walked to the officers' quarters and entered his room. The floor was wood paneled, and the entire room smelled of wood stain. It was bare except a cot in one corner, and a dresser in the adjacent corner. Simmons placed his spare fatigues in the dresser, put his spare ammunition on his belt, and threw his duffel under the cot, then walked out of the room. He went to headquarters and was given his orders and a Warthog; then explored the base in his new Light Reconnaissance Vehicle. The base was positioned at the foot of a tall mountain, which had many tunnels that were once old mines, now used for storage and a fallback position, in case of overwhelming attack. Simmons doubted that all the Rebels in UNSC controlled space combined could take this camp, which had a Regiment of ODSs, an entire Naval Air Squadron, and fifteen scorpion tanks, not to mention almost three thousand regular Marines. Simmons doubted that Ulysses would ever fall to the enemy.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter Three 0700 Hours, January 15, 2525 (Military Calendar)/ Richter System, Planet Richter VII, Camp Ulysses Simmons Walked up to his Platoon's barracks, outside were two MPs. As he walked up they asked for his identification, Simmons knew you didn't need identification to enter a barracks and became suspicious. He noticed they had no insignia, and knew it was a trap. He acted like he was reaching for his papers, and then smacked the first man in the jaw,

which shattered, and the man fell to the ground unconscious. The second man attempted to un-holster his weapon. Simmons grabbed his wrist and twisted, breaking the man's bones. Simmons grabbed the discarded pistol and pressed the barrel of the gun to the man's chin. "Explain yourself!" he roared. Before the trembling man could answer the door opened and a Sergeant walked out. His dark black skin reflected the sunlight like a mirror. The name Dominique was stitched on his fatigues. Simmons turned to him, his temper flaring. " Why was I attacked?" He demanded.

" Looks to me like you did all the attacking," the Sergeant said jokingly. Simmons dropped the ODS and pointed the gun at the Sergeant.

"Answer my question, soldier," Simmons said

" It just our way of saying hello," the Sergeant said jokingly, a crowd had gathered behind him.

" Let me show you mine," Simmons said, he dropped the pistol and punched the sergeant hard. He flew back into the arms of a private. " And you don't want to see how I say goodbye," Simmons told him, this time cracking a smile.

Simmons walked back to his quarters and got out his data pad; there was a message on it.

****UNSC Transmission 23445D-65****

****Encryption Code: **Green**

****Public Key: **File /excised access Charlie**

****From: **Colonel Hastert, CO Camp Ulysses**

****To:** First Lieutenant Matthew Simmons**

****Subject: **First Mission**

Start file/

Lieutenant you first mission will take place tomorrow at

0300 hours. You will be briefed at 0100 Hours in

Briefing Room 1

/End file/

****0300 Hours, January 16, (Military Calendar)****

****Richter System, Planet Richter VII, Outskirts Of
Camp****

****Ulysses****

Simmons dropped one more clip of ammunition for his MA5B Assault Rifle into his backpack before slipping it on. Then he got in the passenger seat of his Warthog and inspected his rifle. Most of the men seemed unhappy that they were not dropping in HEV pods, Simmons

didn't know why; they were unsafe and apparently very uncomfortable. Lance Corporal O'Donnell jumped into the driver's seat, and Private Hanks got into the gunner's position. Simmons put on his helmet and his HUD flickered to life. He had a motion tracker, an ammunition counter and five acknowledgment lights, one for every squad leader and his Sergeant.

"Status," Simmons said, and the five lights turned blue, then faded into darkness. Simmons' mission was to ride into a known rebel hideout, capture a rebel operative and bring him back to base. There were ten regular warthogs with three men each, the other twenty men piled into two "pickup" warthogs with extended beds that sat twelve each, these warthogs would carry the prisoner. Simmons watch showed 0301 Hours, and it was time to go. "Let's roll!" he said to O'Donnell, who then put his foot on the accelerator and the convoy followed. Simmons marveled at what a force he had with him, as the dust from the tires flew into a cloud above them and drifted into the morning sky. The chain guns on these vehicles were enough firepower to blanket an area big enough to clear an LZ that would land five Pelicans with ease, which could add over a hundred men to the battle, but Simmons knew that wouldn't be necessary, this mission was a milk run.

They drove for over an hour and the sun was starting to rise. They arrived at the staging area one mile from the rebel campsite. Simmons opened a COM channel to his squad leaders. "All right, its show time, Blue team are you in position?" he asked, the first light winked. "Green team?" another light flicked on "Red team?" the third and fourth lights blinked blue. "Then that just leaves us O'Donnell, are we in position?"

"Yes, Sir, we are," O'Donnell told him. Simmons clicked his COM three times; the signal to start, and twelve engines revved and the convoy drove down the hill towards the small campsite. As they got close Simmons saw a man running for a Jackhammer Rocket Launcher. Hanks thumbed the Chain gun's trigger and the man was stopped in his tracks by a hail of bullets. Simmons had never seen a man killed before, but he expected it to bother him, this didn't at all, which surprised him. When they reached the camp Simmons jumped out as O'Donnell turned to circle the base. He thumbed the safety off and fingered the trigger. He turned to see a man picking up the Jackhammer, Simmons pulled the trigger and three bullets tore through the man's chest, Simmons' first kill. He was again not affected. He scanned the site, the Warthogs had created a perimeter and the pinned down rebels were stuck inside it. Simmons looked for the rebel leader they were after; he had picked up and out dated M4B rifle and was aiming at O'Donnell. Simmons was forced to shoot, so he quickly pulled the trigger. A single bullet escaped the barrel and hurtled toward the man. It impacted in his shoulder and he dropped the rifle screaming in pain. Simmons ran toward him through the crossfire, leapt over a body and landed at the man's feet, then pulled him up and turned him around. The man let out another scream as Simmons handcuffed him. Two men ran over to him. Their Friend or Foe tags on Simmons' HUD identified them as Private Brock and Corporal Grange. They dragged the rebel to their pickup Warthog and threw him in. Simmons clicked his COM three times again, the signal to get out of there. O'Donnell drove towards him and Simmons jumped in.

Simmons felt strange during the drive back. Not because he was affected by the battle, but rather because he wasn't, combat was

supposed to change a man, why hadn't he felt any remorse or adrenaline rush. Then he remembered the Spartan program, he had been through too much already to be affected by this. Shrugging this off he opened a COM channel to Sergeant Dominique. " Wounded count, Sergeant," he said

" Absolutely zero, except for the bite I received from our prisoner," he chuckled, " it was a perfect mission, Sir," the Sergeant told him. A perfect mission? What about the rebel casualties, weren't they men all the same, why were they doomed to die? Simmons decided to leave that one to the philosophers and congratulate himself, instead. He turned to O'Donnell as they got back and smiled, O'Donnell smiled as well, Simmons felt much more satisfied.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter Four

****1900 Hours, January 16, 2525 (Military Calendar),****

****Richter System, Richter VII, Camp Ulysses Brig****

Simmons first mission was a complete success. He was commemorated with the Combat Action ribbon, and the UNSC Over-system Service ribbon, he wore them proudly as he walked into the Camp's brig. He was checked by two MPs before entering, and then two more once inside. The brig usually had about ten MPs on duty. Today there were at least thirty. And they were all armed with both MA2B assault rifles and M6C pistols. Simmons passed into the interrogation room. There were two ONI officers and three MPs. " You requested my presence, Sir," he said to the senior ONI, a Captain.

" Are you the man who was in charge of the raid at 0300 Hours?" he asked

" Yes, sir" Simmons told him.

" Figures," the other ONI, a Lieutenant, said. Simmons forgot about etiquette and turned to the man.

" What does that mean?" Simmons asked him. The senior officer threw the other man a cold look.

" It means nothing Lieutenant," the Captain said. " Now we are here to interrogate this prisoner and I would like to do so," he said, turning to the rebel. His shoulder was heavily bandaged and his long black hair was tangled and matted. Simmons knew just by looking at him that he hated this man. " Do you mind telling me why this man, who was supposed to captured without personal injury was shot?" the Captain asked Simmons.

" The blame is mine; he was about to shoot one of my men, and I was forced to act," Simmons said, he thought he had done the right thing during the firefight, but this man said he did not. The Lieutenant in the corner sniggered again.

" Lieutenant if it need be I can have you thrown from this room, and placed in a cell of your own," the Captain said, this time to the ONI officer. The man coughed and straightened up. " Now, Mr. Depp," the

Captain said, turning to the rebel. " Do you mind telling me, oh, I know its so cliché, where is the rebel base, and what are your secret plans?" The man gave a mirthless laugh, and looked straight at the Captain, " Our bases are everywhere," he said, smiling, " and our plans are to shoot anything with the letters UNSC on them," the man said, now cackling. The Captain smacked the man in the face, and he stopped smiling.

" Be more specific, please," he told the rebel. Simmons looked with interest on the scene at hand, had he not just seen harassment, then again, did this man deserve more than what he was receiving. " Lieutenant," the Captain said to Simmons, " You're services are no longer needed," he said, as two of the MPs came towards Simmons. He shrugged them off with ease and walked towards the door.

Simmons sat on his cot reviewing the briefing he was given before his mission. Nowhere did it say Depp could not be harmed, only that he was wanted alive. Why had the officer in the brig been concerned if no one else was? Just then Simmons heard a loud thump, as though an explosion had occurred on the base. But no such tests were scheduled today. Reacting instinctively, Simmons grabbed his M6C off his dresser and holstered it, and he ran out of his barracks towards the explosion. He sprinted faster than anyone else, and arrived there first. Two rebels had set off an antitank mine and were now fleeing. Simmons grabbed his sidearm and cocked it. He aimed, and shot the man on the left in the calf, he stopped running and fell, clutching his leg. Simmons remembered what the ONI Captain had said about personal injury to prisoners, and decided to chase the second man. The rebel had about a two hundred meter head start, it didn't take Simmons more than half a minute before he overtook the man and brought him to the ground. He pinned him and looked around for the other rebel, he was about fifty yards back and being taken to the brig by two MPs. Simmons saw two more MPs running towards him and he let the rebel go. The MPs took the prisoner away, and Simmons started towards his barracks. Before he arrived there O'Donnell ran up to him.

" You're wanted at headquarters, Sir," O'Donnell told him.

" Thanks," Simmons said to him as he rushed towards his Warthog, he hopped in the driver's seat and drove towards Headquarters. Headquarters was a large building hewn into the side of Mount Ulysses. It looked like an oversized barracks from the outside, but inside there were five meters of Titanium A Plating on the walls, and over twenty MPs guarding the single elevator that traveled into the center of mount Ulysses. Simmons had to take a fingerprinting scan, a retinal scan, and a DNA scan before being allowed into the elevator. He was escorted by two of the MPs inside the elevator, which slowly made its descent.

When the elevator finally stopped he was escorted to the receptions desk. A corporal sat at the desk, she had dark green eyes, and her beautiful long black hair flowed. Simmons suppressed these thoughts; they would lead to nothing but trouble. The MPs left and Simmons handed his identification to her and she signaled him into the room on the left. He walked in and saluted the Colonel sitting at his desk. The room was in half shadow and Simmons could not read the man's rank or see his face, but the plaque on his desk said Col. Hastert. The Colonel saluted in the shadows and picked up a cigar, he lit it and started to smoke it.

" You wanted to see me, Sir?" Simmons asked.

" Yes, I did," said the Colonel, he leaned out of the shadows and Simmons could see his face, he was the officer who flew down with him on the Pelican. " It turns out your recent mission," he glanced at Simmons new medals, " has won you some acclaim," he told Simmons.

" The success of the mission lies solely with my men, Sir," Simmons said.

" Of course it does," the Colonel replied, " but was it not you who captured Depp, were you not the one who stopped any use of rockets against your men?" the Colonel asked.

"Well, yes," Simmons started to contradict him, but he stopped; he saw the Colonel's point. "Yes, Sir, I was," Simmons told him.

" Well than I would say some congratulations should go to you Lieutenant," the Colonel told Simmons, " but congratulations are not why you are here. You are here to receive your orders for your next mission. The ONI spooks were able to break Mr. Depp, and we have discovered the location of the rebels operation."

" That is good news, Sir, but what does it have to do with my next mission?"

" It is your next mission, Lieutenant. Your platoon is going to drop in to the rebel location, capture the rebel leader, and then kill anything that moves," the Colonel said, he puffed on his cigar and smoke filled the room. " Do you understand your mission lieutenant?" he asked as he took another puff.

" Yes, Sir, I do," Simmons told him, " When you say drop?"

" Yes, Simmons when I say drop I mean HEV pods. You will rendezvous with the UNSC frigate _Petersburg _and drop in, then you will be picked up by Pelicans and flown back here." The Colonel pulled open a drawer in his desk. He grabbed a cigar and a data pad. " This first thing," he said, indicating the data pad, " contains all the information you need. The second," this time indicating the cigar, " is for a job well done," he winked, " and I hope we can enjoy one together soon." The Colonel puffed his cigar, " Dismissed,"

Simmons saluted him and walked out of the room. He took the long way back to his Warthog and then drove back to his barracks. He pulled his Warthog into its spot and entered the barracks; he slipped out of his dress uniform and placed his M6C on top of his dresser, he got on his cot and went to sleep.

****0500 Hours, January 18, 2525 (Military Calendar)****

****Richter System, Richter VII, Camp Ulysses****

Simmons awoke as his alarm went off. He dressed quickly and grabbed all his gear. He holstered his M6C and opened the door out of his quarters. He walked to his Warthog, to see O'Donnell and the Sergeant already in the passenger seat and the gunner position.

"All right we can move out," Dominique said as Simmons hopped into the driver's seat and drove towards the airfield. When they arrived they

saw five Pelicans being prepped for takeoff. Simmons parked his Warthog at the edge of the airfield and he and Dominique walked towards their Pelican. O'Donnell walked over to his squad's Pelican. The pilot was entering the cockpit, but Simmons could see the name Charles on his flight suit. Simmons and Dominique jumped in to the back of the pelican. He accessed the COM panel at the front of the Pelican's bay and opened a channel to the other Pelicans. " Is everybody ready for dust off?" he asked.

" Yes, Sir we are," O'Donnell said over the COM. The four other squad leaders replied and Simmons gave the pilot a thumb up through the window into the cockpit. The back hatch closed and they took off. Simmons inspected the drop ship, Dominique was the only other occupant, but there were crates supplies going up to the _Petersburg _where the other row of crash seats should have been. No voice came from the cockpit. Apparently Charles had received a new copilot. They experienced "turbulence" again as they went through Richter VII's atmosphere. Simmons looked through the window to the cockpit. He could see the _Petersburg _through the front view screen; the four other pelican's were behind them.

The Pelican entered the frigate's hangar, and the back hatch opened, and three men walked in and started carrying the crates out of the drop ship. Simmons grabbed his gear headed for the _Petersburg's _weapons locker. He passed through several corridors before entering an elevator. Once it stopped Simmons walked into the weapons locker. It had been upgraded for Simmons' mission; it contained over one hundred MA5B assault rifles, there were crates of M9 HE-DP fragmentation grenades, and there was a large locker labeled "Rockets". Simmons walked over to the MA5Bs, he grabbed one that was modified. He attached ten clips to his vest and walked over to the crates of grenades. He attached a few to his belt. He saw an unmarked locker and opened it; there were ten M90 shotguns. Simmons grabbed one and slung it on his back, and then he placed two boxes of shells in his drop bag. Just then the rest of the platoon walked in. Most went over to the rack of assault rifles, but some went towards other lockers. O'Donnell walked over to the rockets. He hefted one of the large launchers and grabbed a crate of extra ammunition. He grabbed an MA2B and placed it in his drop bag. Private Hanks walked over to the Lotus anti tank mines. He placed two in his bag, and then grabbed a shotgun. Simmons looked for the platoon's sniper team. The spotter, Private Sanchez, had a laser sight in one hand, and a MA5B in the other. The sniper, Private Allison, was customizing his S2 AM sniper rifle. He was the platoon's only sniper, but he was all they needed. He could make a shot from anywhere. And he certainly deserved the call sign "Omnipresent". Allison seemed happy with his rifle and proceeded to grab an extra M6C and a handful of clips. Dominique walked over to Simmons; he was armed to the teeth. He had an M90 slung on his back, like Simmons, but he also had a Jackhammer rocket launcher, two M6Cs, ample clips of ammunition, and a knife attached to his boot. His drop bag looked like it contained thirty boxes of shotgun shells. Simmons could not believe Dominique could walk. He grabbed a combat knife from the table and handed it to Simmons. " You might need this," he told him, before departing for the HEV pods. Simmons waited for everyone to clear the weapons locker. What was once enough firepower to supply a small army was now almost empty. There were only half as many rifles, the shotguns were all gone, and the crates of grenades were empty. Simmons walked out of the now deserted room and walked to his HEV pod. Satisfied that everyone was ready, Simmons snapped on his helmet and entered his pod.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter Five

****1000 Hours, May 17, 2523 (Military Calendar)****

****Sol System, Planet Earth, Quantico Marine Academy****

Second Lieutenant Matthew Simmons sat on a low, stone wall as he watched the Academy's freshman walk to their classes. He was playing chess with his best friend, Amacus Ermo. Amacus had been top in their class at everything; no one could beat him. Except at fencing, Amacus was good, but Simmons was the best, he knew his way around a sword. Of course this meant nothing to the professors at the Academy. Amacus was still considered the best recruit since Admiral Cole. Simmons wondered why he had agreed to play chess with Amacus, because he always lost. Simmons looked down at the board, it was made of marble, and the pieces were pure gold. The set had been Amacus' graduation present, whereas Simmons was given nothing. He didn't care; his parents were the reason he was a UNSC Marine. They were the reason his brother was a pilot. They had both wanted to get away.

Simmons surveyed the board. He moved his knight to take Amacus' bishop. "Check," he said, satisfied with the move. Amacus smiled, and then moved his rook and took the knight.

" Checkmate," he said with a smile. Simmons let out an explicative that caught the attention of the passerby. He looked away from them and at the board. He tried to figure out a move to escape, but there was none. Simmons had not even seen that rook. Amacus laughed at Simmons feeble attempts to find a move.

" You may think its funny, but one day I'll be better than you at something," Simmons told him, but he didn't believe it. Amacus put the pieces away and folded up the board. He placed the set in his bag and they walked to the mess hall.

Simmons grabbed his meal and sat down at an available table. Amacus arrived a short time later. Simmons looked over Amacus' shoulder. There was a girl at the table over; she had long black hair, and emerald eyes. Amacus turned around to see what Simmons was looking at. When he saw the girl he smiled and turned to Simmons,

" Thoughts like that will get you in trouble, my friend," he said warningly. A boy sat down next to the girl and she kissed him. Simmons looked away from the site.

" You're right," he said, resisting the temptation to look at the girl.

" And would you mind telling me when I'm not, because I am clueless as to when that might be," Amacus joked.

" My guess would be never," Simmons told him.

A man sat down next to Amacus at the table, "Amacus, Simmons," he said, they both nodded to him. It was Fred Peterson, an Ensign in the navy.

" Just thought I'd drop by before I was deployed," he told them.

"What ship are you going out on?" Simmons asked.

" The _Cherokee_, " he told him.

"Well I hope we see you soon," Amacus said to him. Fred looked at his watch and rushed off. Simmons finished his meal and scanned the mess hall. The girl was gone, and her friend was sitting alone. Simmons noticed a woman walking toward their table. There was something unexplainable about her that attracted Simmons. She had an aura of brilliance. She stopped two feet from their table, and Amacus looked at her, Simmons thought he noticed they same look in his eye from he had earlier, when looking at the girl behind him.

"Hello," the woman said to them, Simmons instantly knew he would like this woman, "My name is Doctor Catherine Halsey,"

6. Chapter 6

Chapter Six 0630 Hours, January 18, 2525 (Military Calendar)

****Richter System, Aboard UNSC Frigate _Petersburg _****

In orbit around Richter VII

Simmons entered his pod and shut the hatch. He waited for the all clear signal and then punched the drop button. Fifty pods roared to life as they were launched down towards the surface of Richter VII. "Status report," Simmons said. Five acknowledgement lights turned blue. So far so good, Simmons thought. The HEV pod was incredibly uncomfortable. Simmons waited for the drop to end, to get his feet on solid ground. One of the lights on Simmons' HUD started blinking red, it was O'Donnell's. " O'Donnell what's wrong?" Simmons asked.

" I'm fine," O'Donnell said and Simmons let out a sigh of relief. " But Private Lope's pod is malfunctioning, Sir," O'Donnell said. Simmons swore loudly. " He's going to land a mile from the drop site, in the middle of enemy territory, Sir," O'Donnell told him. Simmons called up a map of the drop site and the projected drop points of the pods, Simmons selected the five men nearest Lope and opened a COM channel to them. You five are to abort our mission and find Lope," they said they understood. Simmons opened a channel to Lope. " Hang tight soldier, help is on the way," Simmons told him.

" Yes, Sir," Lope said, his voice was stone cold, he was not afraid. Simmons heard him thumb the safety off his MA5B. Simmons hoped the men would get there fast enough to save him. This snag would hurt their mission, they would be six men short, but Simmons had to make the decision he did. He wasn't going to let a man die alone on the battlefield, not when something could be done about it. Simmons called up the map again. Their defenses would be weak to the north; Simmons reassigned a fire team from the east to pick up the gap. Now they would also be weak in two places, but much less so. Simmons trusted his men; he knew they could get the job done. Simmons looked at the timer, they would hit in five seconds. The pod's descent

slowed as they deployed their resistance fins. Simmons watched the timer, it reached zero as the pod smacked onto the earth. Simmons popped the hatch. He looked around; he was in the middle of a deserted street. Dominique appeared out of the pod to his left, and O'Donnell popped out of the pod in front of him. "Move out," he said. Dominique pumped his shotgun and walked to a fire escape and started to climb it. O'Donnell holed himself up in a doorway. "We'll need a fallback spot," he told Simmons, then patted his jackhammer, "I'll hold it," Simmons nodded and prepared his MA5B; he slapped in a fresh clip and turned the safety off. He walked to the end of the road to an intersection. He pulled the map off the area on his HUD. He needed to turn left. He did, and standing there was a rebel, obviously alerted by the pods falling into the midst of his home, the man was loading shells into an older model shotgun. He saw Simmons and started to pump it. A shot rang out and the man fell to the ground. A vapor trail was rising into the air above him; the calling card of an S2 AM. "Thanks, Omni," Simmons said into his COM.

"No problem sir," Allison replied. Simmons followed the street to a dead end. He climbed onto a dumpster and hopped over the wall at the end. He was in a narrow alley. At the end of the alley Simmons saw a rebel firing his rifle. Simmons fired a short burst and the man was knocked out of the alley by three bullets impacting with his side. Simmons walked to the end of the alley. Private Hanks was emerging from the cover he had taken as the rebel shot at him. Simmons nodded, and then Hanks returned the gesture. "Is everyone in position?" he asked his squad leaders. All the lights blinked blue. "Lope, what is your status?" Simmons asked the stranded soldier.

"I'm holed down in an alley. There's three men converging on my position," Lope said, still his voice showed no sign of fear. Simmons heard shots over the COM.

"Make that two, Lope, the cavalry has arrived," said a man over the COM, Simmons could not recognize his voice.

Simmons opened a COM to his fire team leaders. "Does anyone need more time?" he asked.

"No, Sir," he heard over the COM. Good.

"All right, let's move," Simmons said. Hanks crouched down and ran down the road. Simmons followed him. They stopped at the end of the street. The rebel's "base" was a building three stories tall, and it took up a whole block. Outside the entrance was LAAG gun, stripped off a stolen Warthog. That would be a problem, Simmons thought.

Simmons heard a thunderous noise and saw a large trail of smoke as a rocket impacted with the LAAG. The gunner was swallowed in the explosion, and the gun was turned to a pile of scrap metal. Simmons waved Hanks forward, and the man ran across the street. He stopped at the building and put his back to the wall. He glanced around and then waved Simmons over. He ran across the street at a full sprint, and barely had time to slow down before he got to the wall. "Cover me, I need to load my M90," Simmons said to Hanks.

"Yes, Sir," he said, and he stepped in front of Simmons. Simmons grabbed his shotgun and a box of shells. He loaded twelve buckshot

shells into the magazine, and pumped it once. He placed his MA5B in his bag and turned into the building.

There were two men standing behind a desk on the far side of the room. They were out of range; Hanks would have to get them. Simmons turned to his left. There was a woman sitting in a chair, when she saw Simmons she started to grab her pistol from its holster. Simmons fired the M90. The shot blew the woman back four feet. Hanks had just entered the room. He leveled his MA5B and fired two bursts, they both caught their targets in the chest, and they fell behind the desk. Simmons checked the room; it was clear. He clicked his COM and waited for the answer.

Explosions rocked the building, and Simmons heard rappelling lines drop from the roof. He heard feet impact with the third floor. "We're in," Dominique said. Simmons waited for the rest of Hanks' squad to fill in. O'Donnell was last. They started up the stairs to the second floor. Simmons heard shots overhead.

The squad filed out of the stairwell and onto the second floor. They separated, and Simmons followed Hanks. There were two guards at the end of the hall. They attempted to level their rifles, but Simmons had hit them both with shots. Simmons opened a door. He saw three men preparing their weapons. Simmons primed a grenade and rolled it into the room.

He ducked out of the room and waited for the detonation. Once he heard it he entered the room. It was clear, Simmons Moved into the next room, which was empty. "Second floor secure," he said into the COM.

"Affirmative," Dominique said over the channel, "Third is clear."

"Alright let's go," Simmons said to his squad leaders. The acknowledgement lights winked and Simmons headed for the stairwell.

He heard gunfire from the street, and then a grenade exploded at the bottom of the stairs. Simmons grabbed his MA5B, as a man appeared through the smoke. Simmons fired a short burst and he fell to the ground. "Sir," O'Donnell said from upstairs, "We got six contacts coming down the street,"

"Is it Lope?" Simmons asked.

"No, Sir," O'Donnell replied.

"Then take them down, Corporal," Simmons barked into the COM.

He ran down the rest of the stairs and looked out the window, several men were coming down the street. Simmons smacked the butt of his rifle into the window and it shattered. He aimed at the first man and opened fire. As he did this, a grenade was hurled from the roof, and two of the men were down. Simmons motion tracker now showed thirteen enemy contacts coming down the street. And an additional five were sneaking down an alley.

Simmons heard a rocket fire overhead and three of the blips from the alley were gone, but then four more appeared. The platoon was pinned

down.

"Dominique, Keep your squads on the roof and lay down suppressing fire from there. O'Donnell, get your squad down here, now!" Simmons shouted. Two lights flickered and faded. The door above him opened, and Private Hanks appeared, followed closely by the rest of his squad. Simmons checked his motion tracker; there were twice as many enemy contacts as before. He looked out the window again and spotted two targets running towards the building, Simmons fired a spray of bullets in their direction and they were cut down. He ducked under the window as the rebels replied to him with suppressing fire. Private Hanks jumped up and fired a three round burst of the window and turned to the left. More shots came through the window. "Allison where are you?" Simmons said after opening a channel to the sniper team.

" We are trying to get to your position, but we're meeting heavy resistance," Allison said, and Simmons could hear him picking off targets as they spoke.

O'Donnell's squad continued to keep the rebels from advancing, but more and more contacts showed up. Simmons checked his motion tracker again, there were now too many contacts to count, his tracker was all red. Simmons looked up, and saw a Private shoot out the window, but he was too slow getting down, and a round caught him in the chest, it tore through his armor and he let out a scream of pain. Simmons turned to the rest of the squad, "Suppressive fire!" he shouted to them, and then turned to the private. He dragged him to the back off the stairwell and laid him down. Simmons had trained extensively with field medicine, and was the closest thing to a corpsman the platoon had. He called over Corporal Redding, who carried the medical supplies. He grabbed a canister of biofoam and shoved it into the Private's bullet hole. The man screamed as Simmons poured it in. He yanked out the canister and grabbed a roll of gauss. He tore off a section of the Private's armor and wrapped him up. He looked at Redding and pointed to the private, Redding came to attend to him, and Simmons ran to O'Donnell, who was crouched next to the window. "Sir, we are running low on ammunition, we need to get out of here." He said.

" I know, I'm gonna try to get Ulysses on the COM," he replied and tried to open a channel to the base, all he got was static. He swore and turned to O'Donnell, "No response," he told him. Simmons fired out of the window until his clip was empty, and he ejected it and slapped another.

Simmons checked his motion tracker again, there were six yellow blips coming towards them. "Lope," he said to himself, and opened a channel to him. "Lope, where are you?" he asked.

"We are advancing on your position now," Lope told him.

"Dominique, concentrate your fire to clear that road, it's our way out," Simmons said through his COM. Ten MA5Bs fired simultaneously from the roof, and Simmons opened a new Channel, to Allison. "Get to the extraction point," he told the sniper team, "we'll meet you there," Simmons told them.

"Yes, Sir," Allison said.

Once the road was clear, Simmons waved O'Donnell's squad out of the building. They filed out and ran to Lope's position. "Dominique, get your men down here!" He shouted. Dominique's light turned blue, and he heard footsteps above him. The rest of the platoon exited the building, and Simmons waited for Dominique. When he arrived they both ran across the street and met up with the squad leaders.

"Time to head for the extraction point," he said, and pulled up his map of the area. He laid out routes for the squads, and then sent them to the four NCOs. Their lights blinked blue, and the squads separated.

Simmons turned to Dominique. "We are going to meet up with Allison and Sanchez," he told him, and Dominique nodded. He dropped his empty jackhammer launcher and pulled out his two M6Cs. Simmons checked his ammo counter, it read 56. He turned down the street, and Dominique followed. Simmons kept his eye on the rooftops. He wasn't going to be ambushed. Simmons followed the street to a four-way intersection. He pointed Dominique up a ladder, indicating that Allison was up there. Dominique started to climb up the ladder. Simmons prepared to follow him when he heard an engine roar. An old truck came into his view, in the back was a small turret, and a man was on it. Simmons leveled his MA5B, but he knew it would be too late. The man on the turret prepared to fire, but suddenly fell out of the back, as a large vapor trail rose from the spot. Simmons realized that Allison still had his back. The driver of the vehicle must have noticed that he had no gunner, because he started driving straight at Simmons. "Allison," Simmons said as he fired at the vehicle, but he could not land a shot on the driver.

"I'm out, Sir," Allison replied. The driver was twenty meters away when Simmons heard shots above him. The driver was hit several times and fell on the wheel, the truck swerved to the left when it was two meters from Simmons. He looked up; Dominique had secured his footing on the ladder, and swung upside down and opened fire on the vehicle. He nimbly pulled himself up and continued to climb. Simmons followed.

As Simmons pulled himself up the last rungs of the ladder he could see Allison and Sanchez inspecting their weapons. Sanchez had just slapped a clip into his MA5B, and Allison was checking the sight on his M6C. Dominique scouted the rooftops, "If we cut across those two buildings," he said, indicating to the roofs adjacent to the one they were currently on, "And then jump onto that one," he added, indicating to a building two stories shorter, "We have a clear path to the extraction point on the rooftops the whole time," he said. Simmons looked at Dominique's plan, it seemed like it would work, and Simmons trusted the Sergeant's scouting abilities.

"All right," Simmons said, "Let's move out, Dominique take point. Sanchez, watch our six,"

They moved across the roof swiftly, and made the short jump to the next roof. Once they crossed the next rooftop they arrived at a large gap between the two buildings.

"Can we make that?" Sanchez asked.

"Of course we can, Marine," Dominique said. Sanchez did not seem convinced.

"Sergeant, Secure the rooftop," Simmons said. Dominique took a step back, jumped and cleared the gap. Simmons indicated to Allison, who also made it. Simmons took three steps back. He grabbed Sanchez' arm and pulled him back as well. He started to run forward, and jumped at the last possible second. They flew forward, and down onto the building. Simmons braced for impact and checked his trajectory, they were coming in fast, and Simmons wasn't sure the roof would withstand their weight.

He came crashing down and the shingles on the roof buckled and cracked under the impact. Sanchez flew onto his stomach and tore more shingles off. Dominique pulled the Private up and handed him his discarded MA5B. Sanchez stood up, and Dominique continued across the rooftops. Simmons kept an eye out for any activity on the rooftops, but there was nothing; the entire area was deserted. Dominique held up a hand to indicate they stop. He crouched down and scouted the area. Simmons could see the extraction point in the distance. "O'Donnell, are you in position?" Simmons asked over the COM.

"We are all ready for dust off, waiting for your arrival," O'Donnell said. Simmons closed the channel and turned to Dominique.

"Are we ready to go?" he asked.

"No, Sir, there is a patrol below us, or more what's left of one." Dominique said to him.

Simmons looked down, there were five men sitting at the front of the building. One of them was wounded, and was being treated by another. They were apparently regrouping after the attack. They had no idea Simmons was above them, and apparently were oblivious to the fact that five UNSC pelican drop ships were five hundred meters from them. They had picked a bad place to regroup. Simmons pulled the last fragmentation grenade from his belt. He turned to Dominique, who apparently had the same idea and was clutching his own fragmentation grenade. Simmons held up three fingers, he put one down, then another. As he put down the last finger he yelled, "Frag out!" and they both unpinning their grenades and dropped them onto their unsuspecting victims. They exploded on impact and sent shrapnel flying into the air. Simmons aimed his MA5B and looked for survivors. All five men were lying on the ground motionless. Simmons motioned Sanchez down the fire escape, and Dominique followed.

Simmons waited for them to reach the ground. Dominique waved to them that it was all clear. Simmons and Allison went down the fire escape and followed Sanchez to the extraction point. The Pelicans were all ready, and O'Donnell waved them into the second Pelican. Simmons strapped in and the Pelican rose off the ground.

Simmons looked around the Pelican, Dominique was inspecting his helmet, and O'Donnell was looking out the back of the drop ship. Simmons looked towards the cockpit; through the window he could see the pilot. There was a lightning bolt on his shoulder, and Simmons wondered if Charles was again flying him. He thought it was odd, but he shrugged it off.

They started their descent over Ulysses' airfield, and Simmons noticed there was an unusually large number of personal waiting.

As they got out of the back, Simmons noticed Colonel Hastert standing in the distance. He was discussing something with the Squadron CO, Major Chambers. At the sight of Simmons' arrival Hastert ended the discussion and walked toward him. Simmons also noticed the two ONI officials from the interrogation room standing on the far edge of the airfield, they were looking straight at him, and it made him uncomfortable. Simmons saluted Hastert, who barely thought to return it. "Lieutenant," he said as he shook Simmons hand. Simmons knew something was about to happen. "Congratulations," he said.

"Thank you," Simmons replied, while keeping a watchful eye on the ONI officers. Hastert started walking towards them, and beckoned Simmons should follow. He reluctantly did, and noticed that he was subconsciously thumbing the safety off his MA5B. He immediately flipped it back on, and tried to suppress his feelings, he knew that ONI spooks could smell fear.

"Hello, Lieutenant," the Captain said. Simmons saluted him, but he did not return it. Simmons had no idea what was wrong, but something must be. "We would like you to join us for lunch, at 1200 hours, tomorrow, in the officer's club?" the captain told him more than asked him. Simmons nodded that he understood, but he truly did not. Why would two senior officers want to have lunch with a Lieutenant?

"That will be all, Simmons get some rest," the Colonel said, and the two ONI officials strode off at once. The Colonel walked towards his Warthog, which was flanked by two others. O'Donnell walked up to Simmons, "What was that about, Sir?" he asked.

"I don't know," he said to him, "But I'm going to find out,"

7. Chapter 7

****Chapter Seven****

****1200 Hours, January 19,2525 (Military Calendar)****

****Richter System, Richter VII, Camp Ulysses Officer's

****Club****

Simmons arrived at the officer's club promptly at 1200 Hours. He parked his warthog and awaited the arrival of Colonel Hastert and the ONI spooks, whose names he still did not know. When they arrived, Simmons saluted and the Colonel indifferently returned it. He brushed past Simmons and walked inside. The other officers seemed not to notice Simmons at all.

Inside, the Colonel turned to the receptionist, "We'll take the private room," he said to her. She nodded and started walking towards the back. Simmons was not aware there was a back room, but sure enough, they walked past the dining room, and the bar, and into a back room, completely secluded from the rest of the building. Two waiters walked in and handed them menus. They ordered drinks and the waiters left. "Well, I am sure you'd like to know why you are here," the Colonel said.

"Yes, Sir," Simmons replied. "Also, it may seem odd, but if the Captain doesn't mind my asking, Sir, I would like to know your name,"

The captain turned to him, "Names are not important," he said. Simmons nodded, but felt concerned. Why the secrecy? Even for an ONI officer, this was unusual.

"Of course, Sir," Simmons said.

The waiters arrived with their drinks, and they placed their orders. Once they had departed the Colonel spoke again, "Now, down to business," he said, "Everyone in this room knows who you are,"

"And what you are," added the Captain.

"Yes, we all know you are a Spartan I, and were the only surviving subject." The Colonel said.

"But there is something you don't know," the Captain said. He spoke softly, and his voice was cold. "You are not the only Spartan."

This statement flustered Simmons, "But didn't you just say I was?" he asked.

"We said you were the only Spartan I, but there were others after you, your successors," the Captain's voice chilled Simmons, and he was suddenly very cold.

"Others?"

"Yes," the Colonel told him, "There are currently seventy five subjects preparing to be augmented, they will be the Spartan II's."

"You understand that all of this is classified?" the Captain asked him.

"Yes, Sir, of course I do," Simmons told him, "But why are they continuing the project, I was the only survivor of twenty subjects, why are they risking more?" Simmons asked him.

"You were a test subject," the captain said. "A guinea pig. You were preparation for the Spartan II's." The captain's voice grew even colder, "They used you to perfect the process, so they could make changes. Spartan One was never meant for anything more than tests, you were never meant to be an asset to the UNSC."

The thought of being called a guinea pig was repulsing. Halsey had said that Spartan One was going to help save the UNSC from civil war, not help her ruin other lives as well. Simmons thought of Amacus, how he had died in a tube, a man destined for greatness, who died for a test. It was disgraceful.

The waiters reappeared, carrying trays of food. As one of them laid a plate in front of Simmons, he realized he did not have much of an appetite.

The Colonel began to eat his meal, but the ONI officers just sat there.

"Where are these Spartan's now?" Simmons asked.

"They are on Reach," the Colonel told him, between mouthfuls of food. The Captain seemed repulsed by the Colonel's eating habits, but started to neatly cut up his meal. Simmons looked at his plate; there were plentiful helpings of meat and vegetables. It was the most lavish meal Simmons had ever seen. He picked up his fork and tore off a piece of the meat and ate it. It was excellent. For a second Simmons forgot the hardships of being the only Spartan I to survive, about Amacus dying, about everything, but they suddenly rushed back into him. He suppressed his feelings, and tried not to make a show of them, but he was certain the Captain knew everything Simmons thought or felt.

"Sir," Simmons said to the Colonel, "I would like to be transferred to Reach."

This statement seemed to startle even the Captain.

"Lieutenant, your needed here," the Colonel said.

"With all due respect, Sir," Simmons said to him, "The rebel threat here is all but neutralized, and you have more than enough qualified officers,"

"Why?" this time, the Lieutenant spoke, he was given a cold look from the Captain, but he spoke again, "Why do you want to go to Reach?"

"I want to see these Spartans, and I wish to speak with Dr. Halsey," there was a hint of frustration in his voice, and Simmons regretted using such a tone in front of superior officers.

"I will do what I can Simmons," the Colonel said, "But I make no guarantees."

"Thank you, Sir," Simmons said.

He finished his meal and prepared to leave as a waiter walked in. He handed a data pad to the Colonel and left. The Captain looked inquisitively at the Colonel, who began to read whatever the message was. Once he was done he placed it on the table and looked at Simmons. The ONI Lieutenant reached for the Data pad, but the Captain glanced at him, and he retracted his arm.

"Well, Lieutenant," the Colonel said, looking at Simmons, "You're mission was a complete success. We sent a Recon team into the area, and it was completely clear. There was not a rebel in sight,"

"Thank you, Sir,"

"No, thanks to you Simmons, your platoon has now completed two flawless missions. I am sure an outfit like yours would be welcome on Reach." The Colonel told him. He stood up and exited the room, Simmons and the others followed.

1100 Hours, January 23, 2525 (Military Calendar) /

****Richter System, Richter VII, Officer's Barracks,****

Colonel Hastert had arranged for Simmons to be transferred to Reach. His platoon would be going, as well, and they were to leave in four days on the UNSC Montgomery. Simmons was occupying himself by studying his previous missions. He looked at mission recordings, Recon assessments, and anything else he had clearance to view. He ran over the missions in his mind. He tried to figure out what went right, and what went wrong. He also checked on Private Kingsley, who had been wounded during the fighting. He was recovering, but might not be able to continue service. His left shoulder was currently immobile.

Simmons sat on his cot looking over a data pad. He was checking to see how many shots were fired during the firefight, he did not know why. There was a knock on his door. "Enter," he said. The door opened and O'Donnell walked in.

"Sir," O'Donnell said. He stood at the doorway, and Simmons knew something was up.

"Can I help you Corporal?" he asked.

"Sir, I was sent here to tell you, Kingsley won't be serving with us anymore," He said, "He is being shipped to the M2SL Recovery Station, for further medical treatment"

"Okay, when will we receive his replacement?"

"He is going to meet us on Reach, Sir,"

Simmons laid the data pad on the cot and grabbed his M6C. He holstered it and exited his room. He walked out of the Barracks, and O'Donnell followed. Simmons hopped into his warthog, and O'Donnell stood next to him.

"Hop in," Simmons said, and O'Donnell climbed into the passenger seat.

Simmons followed the main road to the end of the base. He went through the security checkpoint and drove off. He followed a dirt road for nearly twenty minutes, and then took a sharp turn onto a very beaten path. It went upward, towards the summit of Mt. Ulysses. Once they reached a certain spot Simmons stopped the warthog. He got out and walked through a clump of trees. On the other side was a small cliff. It overlooked all of camp Ulysses, and much more. Richter VII was sparsely populated, there was only one large city, and Simmons could see its outskirts on the horizon. There were several small towns, and one large hydroponics center, that grew all the food for the planet. The continent that Ulysses was on was the only land besides several small islands. Simmons could see the coast to the east, and there was a small river that ran all the way through Camp Ulysses. O'Donnell let out a low whistle at the sight. He looked over the base, and smiled. "How long have you known about this?" O'Donnell asked.

"Since the first day I got here. It's beautiful, isn't it?" Simmons asked. O'Donnell just stood there; he kicked a small rock off the cliff, and watched it fall. Simmons sat down and watched the activity on the airfield. There were five Pelicans preparing to send Marines to the wilderness-training center.

They sat there watching the peaceful activity below for over an hour. The sun started to set, and Simmons headed for the Warthog. They followed the path down the mountain, and back into the base.

Simmons and O'Donnell visited the cliff every day until the _Montgomery_ arrived. They discussed Reach, and what they would be assigned to do there.

O'Donnell still did not know about the Spartans, but Simmons knew that he would have to tell him someday.

8. Chapter 8

Chapter Eight 0700 Hours, January 27, 2525 (Military Calendar) /

****Richter System, Richter VII, Camp Ulysses, ****

****Officer's Barracks****

Simmons woke up on the day they were to depart for Reach and started packing. He dressed in his fatigues and holstered his M6C. Once his duffel was full of all his possessions he headed for his Warthog. He clipped the duffel onto the back, and hopped in the driver's seat.

He drove to the depot and handed it over. He walked the half a mile to the airfield where the Pelicans were being prepped for take off. O'Donnell and Dominique were talking to the pilot of one of the Pelicans. Simmons walked up to them, and without saying a word to either Dominique or O'Donnell, he turned to the pilot and said, "Let's go." The pilot obeyed and walked into the cockpit, as the mechanics rushed off the airfield. The doors to the Pelicans closed, and their engines roared to life. Simmons attached his bag to the floor of the Pelican and strapped himself into a crash seat as the drop ship took off.

Simmons looked around; Dominique and O'Donnell were sitting next to each other, quietly discussing something. With Simmons' advanced hearing abilities, he could have paid attention, and heard every word, but he did not care to. There were also five other men from Simmons' platoon. They were all quiet, some of them seemed frightened of Simmons, and no one was sitting within a seat of him. He felt the pelican accelerate as it cleared Richter VII's atmosphere, and the ride became smoother. Simmons patiently waited as the pelican slowly approached the oncoming _Montgomery_, the ship was outfitted with over one hundred ODSs, and Simmons was hoping to blend in, but that would mean he would have to stay away from the gym. Simmons rarely worked out anymore, Halsey had said it wasn't necessary after the augmentation, but it felt strange nonetheless.

Simmons could feel the drop ship decelerate as it entered the _Montgomery's_ hangar bay, and gravity was restored. Once the Pelican landed the Marines started to pile out. Simmons waited for everyone to leave, and once the pilot had exited the cockpit he slowly exited the back hatch and walked to the corridor that would take him to his quarters.

He could hear whispers coming from the assorted pilots and mechanics in the crowded hangar, and most were directed at him. He ignored the looks and whispers, and quietly weaved his way through Pelicans and Longswords as well as one small ONI corvette. He wondered who the ONI officials aboard the _Montgomery _were, and if they knew about him.

Simmons arrived at the corridor and left the whispers and glances behind him. He walked down the corridor, which was luckily deserted. Simmons felt good to be alone. He was not always like this, but now he succumbed to the wish to be alone, to just think. And remember. There were only two things that made him comfortable now: being alone, and being in combat.

As he reached the end of the empty corridor he entered his quarters. He had requested to be as far from the main crew quarters as possible. He was finally completely alone. He dropped his duffel unceremoniously on the floor and sat on his bed. He thought about Reach, and the new Spartans, and Dr. Halsey. After five hours of sitting and thinking Simmons could feel his stomach churn from hunger, and prepared to leave for the _Montgomery's _mess hall.

As he exited his room for the ship's elevator his thoughts were suddenly thrown to his parents. He did not know why he was reminded of them, but sure enough he could not stop from thinking of them. His parents had been horrible people. His father abused him; that was why he started to work out. His mother insulted him often, so he began to study as well. He realized now, that though his parents, if they were still alive, were horrible role models, they had shaped him into the exemplary Marine he was. He had become fit so he could defend himself, and he studied to prove his mother wrong.

The horrible household had driven his brother to leave for the UNSC, just as it done to Simmons. His drive to be the best had led him to join the Spartan I program. He knew now that his parents were the reason for everything, good or bad, that happened in his life. He no longer blamed them, but accepted their role in shaping his life.

Simmons reached the elevator and stopped thinking about his childhood. As gravity fluctuated between the spinning decks of the _Montgomery _as it ascended Simmons simply stood there, the other passengers made quick glances at him, but that was normal to Simmons now, and did not bother him.

As Simmons entered the crowded mess hall, he could sense the feeling of awe that passed over the crew and Marines stationed on the _Montgomery_. Simmons had recently been measured at six foot ten inches, and he weighed in at three hundred pounds. He lowered his head as he entered and walked for the buffet line.

The ship was outfitted with a prototype portable hydroponics center, and there were ample, lush vegetables and fruits laid out. Simmons grabbed a tray and slowly advanced down the line. He noticed he was grabbing twice as much as the men in front of him, and started to pick less. Once he was through the line he scanned the mess hall. He looked for any members of his platoon, the only men who understood him, but he saw none of them. It reminded him of his days in the academy. Simmons had known what it was like to be alone well before his augmentation. As a child he was felt forced to be alone, and

would not venture out into the world. At the academy that changed, he met Amacus, and finally had what he could call a friend. Now that Amacus was dead, Simmons had no one. He knew that wasn't true, he had O'Donnell, and Dominique, but still he felt alone as he sat at an empty table and began to eat his plentiful meal. He could practically feel the burning glances cast by those around him. He simply sat and ate.

As he finished his meal he got up to leave the mess hall. Through his peripheral vision he could see three men get up as he did, and the followed him into the empty corridor. As they closed in on him Simmons turned around.

He quickly sized them up; there were two navy ensigns, and a marine private. The three men were all at least eight inches shorter than Simmons, and none weighed half as much as he did, but he knew they were looking for a fight. "Can I help you, gentleman?" Simmons asked, the ensigns cracked their knuckles and stared at him, but the private was unsure of himself, and involuntarily backed up a step.

"Yeah, freak, you can," the ensign on the left said. Simmons didn't want to aggravate the man, but would not stand for such a breach of rank.

"I am superior officer, not a freak," Simmons told him. The ensign did not back down, but the private took another step backward. Simmons prepared for the fight he was now sure would come.

"Just shut up, freak," the ensign said as he charged at Simmons. The private behind him turned and ran, "coward," the ensign on the right said, as he too closed in.

"No," Simmons said, now smiling, "smart."

The first ensign attempted to grab Simmons around the waist, but he shrugged him off. The man was impressively strong, but still no match for Simmons augmented strength. The second ensign tried to land a punch. Simmons grabbed his wrist, and simply squeezed until he felt the bone crack, and the man fell to the floor. The ensign behind Simmons jumped on his back and attempted to choke him. Simmons grabbed the man's knee. He pulled upward, and the man was sent flying to the ground, he landed on his back, and was slow to move. The second ensign had now gotten up, and was clutching his wrist. When he saw Simmons was still standing he prepared to punch again, this time with his left hand. Simmons sidestepped, and the man's punch went astray. He had exposed his side to Simmons, who sent an uppercut into his ribcage. The man flew sideways into the bulkhead, then fell to the ground, and did not get up. Simmons strode away; he did not want to be involved when someone arrived at the scene.

Simmons walked to the Montgomery's cryo section. He walked up to the engineer managing the sixty pods lined out on this deck. "Is it too late to have a pod?" Simmons asked. The man had the usual look on his face, as if he had stumbled upon a monster, but it went away faster than most others'. He quickly pulled up a registry of the pods and found an open one.

"If, you'll follow me, sir," he said, as he walked briskly to a row of small lockers, "You're clothes," he said as he opened one of the vacant lockers. Simmons stripped his clothing and placed them in the

locker neatly. He closed the locker, and followed the engineer to an opened pod. Simmons hopped inside and the hatch closed.

He felt the gases flow into the pod and he slowly drifted to a deep sleep.

****0900 Hours, February 3, 2525/(Military Calendar)****

****Aboard UNSC _Montgomery _In orbit around planet Reach.****

Simmons found himself abruptly awake after his weeklong stay in cryo-sleep. As he exited the pod he started choking on the "nutritious" fluids that were stuck in his throat, Simmons doubted something that was good for you could taste so vile, but he had drilled in cryo-sleep in OCS and did as he had been instructed. Once he had assured himself he could walk he casually strode over to the locker containing his fatigues, which he quickly slipped on and walked out of Cryo.

The Ship was aflutter with talk of Simmons fight, but no one knew who had done such things to the two ensigns, who were refusing to talk. Simmons enjoyed not being the center of attention, but he was as clueless as any as to why the men attacked a superior officer, but he sent the memory of the fight to the depths of his memory and grabbed his equipment from his quarters, and prepared to go to the planet.

Simmons met up with his platoon in the hangar bay, and waited for the drop ships' final preparations to finish. There were ten Pelicans going to the surface, only five would be carrying Simmons men, he wondered aloud who the other pelicans were carrying.

"No idea, Sir," said Private Sebastian Fiurah, the platoon's new medic, who had met up with them on the _Montgomery, _he was a tall, spindly man, and his legs looked like toothpicks compared to Simmons massive calves. Nonetheless, Fiurah would be a valuable asset, Simmons would no longer be required to tend to the wounded, and could focus on commanding his troops.

As the mechanics stepped away from their respective drop ships the crew chiefs started to wave in their passengers. Simmons boarded the first Pelican. It was specially fit with two extra anvil missile pods, and had an extra inch or two of titanium-A armor. The extra armor made the passenger compartment cramped, and there was only one row of crash seats. Simmons, Fiurah, and O'Donnell attached their duffels to the floor hooks and strapped themselves into the crash seats, as two more marines walked in. They were not from Simmons platoon, but they wore the Helljumper colors, and they had the customary tattoos that Simmons had yet to receive. They quietly sat down, but did not fasten themselves in, careless, Simmons thought.

As the back hatch started to close the Crew Chief entered, and took the seat nearest the cockpit, and shouted "All Clear, GO! GO!" to the pilot, who gunned his engines, and turned to exit the Ships hangar.

Simmons felt a jolt as the pelican jumped from the spinning section of the _Montgomery _into the deep space around Reach. Through a small viewscreen he could see the _Montgomery _get smaller and smaller, as

the small fleet of Pelicans slowly drifted towards the surface.

Once clear inside Reach's atmosphere the ride was uneventful, and the pilot brought his ship down onto the large landing pad in near-synchronous time with the other Dropships. Once the Crew Chief gave them the all clear the Marine's piled out of the Pelican, and walked to the edge of the airfield. Simmons spotted a single warthog, and its driver's seat was already occupied.

He walked up to it and approached the corporal inside. "Who is this for?" he asked, looking back to see any officers who might have gotten off the other five pelicans, but there were none.

"You, Sir," he said to Simmons, "I was sent by Doctor Halsey."

Simmons tersely nodded and strode to the back. He attached his duffel to the base of the M41 LAAG, and strode to the passenger side. As he got in he could see the rest of his Platoon slowly walking to their barracks, four miles away. He wondered why Halsey had sent the warthog, but was told why when the driver turned the opposite way, and drove towards the all-to-familiar Medical Facility. He was going to see Dr. Halsey.

As the vehicle came to a grinding stop on the loose gravel Simmons could see the massive Medical complex. There were at least six stories to the main building, and was nearly as wide as Reach's airfield. Simmons left his duffel in the back and strode for the complex "Take that to my barracks," he said, indicating his bag. The Corporal nodded and spun the warthog on a dime and sent up a cloud of dust as he drove away.

Simmons gave his identification at the front desk and was sent to doctor Halsey's office. When he arrived it was empty, and he took in a small padded chair across from her desk. Her walls were decorated with pictures of small children, Simmons counted at least seventy before he was interrupted by Halsey's entrance.

"This way," She said curtly, and left the room. Simmons followed her as she half ran out of the building, and turned a corner to a small parade ground.

"Hello, Doctor," Simmons said quietly.

"Hello," she replied, for some reason she did not want to talk and she kept her distance from Simmons.

Once they reached the edge of the Parade grounds Simmons could see what he believed to be a company of Marines, that was, until he saw their faces. They were children, no more than fifteen. They preformed the drills with near-blinding quickness, and every move was perfect.

"Who are they?" he asked, "JRUTC?"

"No," she replied, "Your successors,"

Chapter Nine

****0800 Hours, February 10, 2525/(Military Calendar)****

****Epsilon Eridani System, Reach Medical Complex, Planet Reach****

Simmons had spent the past week becoming acquainted with his new barracks. He had yet to actually meet the Spartan II's, but he watched them drill every day. He watched, as they became increasingly better, their drills where flawless, he doubted his platoon would ever act in such a manner. Today he looked as they drilled on an obstacle course; they flew through it as if it were a child's playground. Simmons knew that he could do better, and he yearned to go run the course, but knew he should not. These were children, they were not supposed to beat him, and he knew he would not feel better by defeating them in a simple obstacle course. He waited anxiously for their augmentation. When he could truly see why his friends had died, he waited for when he would no longer need to sit on a grassy field, alone, knowing he was truly the only one of his kind. For when he could finally belong, yet he still knew he did not truly belong, he knew, deep inside, that he was cursed to be alone forever. He longed to be just the normal Marine he had been, he longed for the life before he met Dr. Halsey, but something told him that was not true. He knew that what he had done was necessary, but still he wondered what his life would be had he never been a Spartan. What would happen were Amacus still alive? He forced himself to stop thinking these thoughts, dreaming and wondering were a luxury he could not afford.

SPARTAN-104, Frederic, took in a deep breath as he finished the obstacle course CPO Mendez had set up for them inside the Medical Facility Complex. It had many surprises not found on a normal course. As Fred looked back at the course he watched the others finish. Kelly had, of course, been the first done, and was now pleading with Mendez to let her run it again. Fred smiled as Mendez simply stared past her and ignored her fruitless pleas. As SPARTAN-117, John, finished he came over to Fred.

" Congratulations," he said.

"For what?" Fred asked.

"You beat me," John said jokingly, and Fred smiled again. As John turned to face him Fred noticed a puzzled look on his face.

"What?" Fred asked, but John simply stared. Fred now turned himself, to see a single man standing on the edge of the course. As Fred strained his eyes to soak in every possible detail of the man, Sam came behind them and let out a disapproving sigh.

"An ODST," he said, "He's here everyday."

"Why?" John asked, but Fred continued to stare. Something about the man perplexed him. Fred could not take his eyes off him; he continued to stare even as Mendez called them over to start the course again. Finally he was able to tear away, but not before seeing the man walk away, he slowly got into a Warthog and drove off, leaving a cloud of dust in his wake.

"104, Are you deaf? I said on the double," Mendez shouted, and Fred was forced to stop looking back.

Simmons walked away from the course as the sun started to set. He watched his long shadow copy his every move before him. He walked the seven miles back to his barracks double time, and made it in a little over an hour. Before he turned inside he looked back, he could still see the top of the enormous complex over the rolling hills of Reach's landscape. The sun had finally set, and the stars shone brightly onto him. Simmons finally opened the door and walked to his quarters. His clothing had been folded neatly, his M6C was holstered and on top of his small cot, his bag was under it. Simmons moved the M6C to his dresser and plopped down on the cot. He didn't try to fall asleep, he just thought. For hours on end he simply sat there thinking about the past week he had spent on Reach. He wondered why Dr. Halsey wouldn't speak to him, why he wouldn't speak to the Spartan's. Then, against his will, he drifted to sleep.

**0400 Hours, February 13/(Military Calendar) Epsilon Eridani System, Reach Medical Complex, Planet Reach **

Today Simmons Swore he would talk to the Spartan's, he just wanted the right opportunity. He drove to the course inside the Complex in a borrowed warthog and parked on the edge of the hill over looking the parade grounds and obstacle course. He sat on the bumper of the warthog and watched as the seventy five Spartans filed out onto the parade grounds, the man drilling them, CPO Mendez, was the shortest man out there, but he commanded respect, and he could tell all of the Spartans not only respected him, but feared him.

As they finished their drills and walked for the obstacle course Simmons sat down on the dewy grass. His boots quickly became soaked from the watery residue, but his feet stayed dry, so he didn't care. The Children ran through the obstacle course. Simmons noticed the girl finish first again, he wanted badly to test himself against her, but decided against it. As the final Spartan finished the course they gathered around the CPO. Mendez began to speak, but even Simmons augmented hearing couldn't pick up what he was saying. Mendez looked at Simmons and then back at his Spartans. Simmons wondered what that was about, and received an answer as the three boys who had stared at him three days ago walked towards him. Simmons started to walk for the driver's seat of the Warthog, but checked the motion; it would be suspicious if an ODSI tore off while watching Spartans drill. He simply stood up and awaited their arrival. As they walked up the hill the sandy haired one spoke up.

"CPO Mendez wants to see you," he shouted, he seemed to command authority, apparently He thought he was in control, he thought wrong.

"Tell CPO Mendez that he will kindly come up here and request that I speak to him." Simmons said as they finally caught glimpse of his insignia. The two others saluted him, and Simmons returned it, but the taller one simply stared at him. "Do I need to put that in the form of an order?" he asked him.

"No, sir," said one of the others, the Sandy haired one refused to speak. "CPO Mendez wishes to discuss classified material with you, and feels this location to be unsafe, he believes the parade ground to be more secure."

"Very well," Simmons regrettably replied, and followed them to Mendez.

As Simmons locked eyes with the Chief Petty Officer he knew he recognized him. The Spartans were apparently unaware of this, as they simply looked at the two of them in awe.

"Lieutenant, you are here everyday, watching my men, and I want to know why," The CPO said.

"I have my reasons and I happen to know you are aware of them."

"But my Spartan's do not, and I am sure they are curious," Mendez told him.

"Well then why don't you tell them?" Simmons asked.

"I would rather show them, Recruit Kelly, on the double." As He said this one of the Spartans walked forward, it was the fast one, Simmons knew what was next, and by the look on her face Simmons could tell she didn't. "Simmons, I wish for you to race my fastest Spartan in my obstacle course."

"Okay," Simmons replied, "But it's hard to race myself, I usually tie." He jokingly replied.

Kelly now was aware what she was supposed to do, but Simmons comment had confused her and she barely heard Mendez shout, "GO!"

Pleased with his head start Simmons sprinted the first one hundred yards in eight seconds, and then he jumped over the low-lying hurdles. He was a full thirty Meters ahead of the girl when he reached the first real obstacle. The Fence stood ten meters tall, and wood blocks jutted out at random places. Simmons climbed with lightning speed, but Kelly climbed faster.

As Simmons jumped off the top, with a resounding thud and a cloud of dust, he noticed the girl was almost to the top. He Sprinted to the next obstacle, a man made lake, and swam across.

Kelly was obviously not a swimmer, as Simmons gained back his thirty-meter lead with ease. Once out of the pool he turned the corner of the course into a set of monkey bars. Mendez had put forth an odd course, but Simmons followed it all the same. He pulled himself on top of the monkey bars and ran the two hundred meters instead of pulling himself, he wondered if that meant disqualification.

As he ran the third leg of the course and turned the corner he saw a mile long sprint, the track was covered by rubber pellet machine guns. At least he hoped they were rubber pellet. He hesitated and Kelly nearly caught up with him. But he sprinted off, as the guns opened fire. As He was struck by the first round he realized they were not rubber pellets, but paintballs. He slowed down and was hit by three more. They stung but he kept going. He clutched his chest and full out sprinted the next quarter mile. He knew he was not a long distance runner, and hoped Kelly wasn't either. He checked his lead; it was still substantial and he slowed to a quick jog until she was only two meters behind. He used his last burst of energy to cross

the finish line ahead. And then he rolled onto the ground.

Exhausted he gasped for air and stared into the beautiful blue sky. Kelly finished a few seconds later, and Simmons could tell she was angry. She spit onto the ground and looked away from him in disgust, she dared not look at the other Spartan's, too. Mendez started to clap his hands as Simmons stood up, but the Spartans did not. They apparently didn't like one of their kind being beaten by an ODST. Little did they know; he was their kind.

"Congratulations, Lieutenant, you can beat children," A voice jokingly said. Simmons jumped up and saw it was Dr. Halsey's voice.

"Yes, ma'am, I can," Simmons replied, happy Halsey would finally speak to him.

She turned to CPO Mendez, and he ordered the Spartans to retreat to their barracks.

"Doctor," Mendez said, as he curtly nodded at Halsey. She nodded in response, and turned back to Simmons.

"Walk with us," she said, "Please," she seemed to add the last word out of respect, but Simmons didn't know why. As they started to walk, away from the Medical Complex, The Doctor spoke again, "As you are well aware, the Spartan II project is in full swing, and will be completed within the coming months."

"Yes, I am," Simmons, said, "What does it have to do with me?"

Halsey stopped in her tracks, Simmons could tell the doctor was flustered, and she started to clean her glasses, as if that would somehow help her understand.

"What?" she said, placing her glasses back on the bridge of her nose. "Why would it _not_ involve you?"

"With all due respect Ma'am," Simmons said, as he prepared to uncap months of anger, "I have been hung out to dry, to no help from you, why should I care if your little experiment works or not? I am just a guinea pig." He reminded her. Halsey was speechless, but Mendez was not.

"Son, you have been helped in ways you'll never understand." With that the Petty Officer walked away, as did the Doctor, and Simmons was left to trek back to his barracks alone, thinking about what Mendez said, and how Halsey had ever helped him.

10. Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

1300 Hours, January 30, 2525(Military Calendar)

**UNSC High Command (HighCom) Facility Bravo-5, **

Sydney, Australia, Earth

Most officers were not allowed a private state room in a UNSC HighCom facility before they reached the rank of General, Major Ackerson, however, didn't see himself as "most" officers. He amused himself with this fact again as he lit another one of his cigars, and put its successor in the ashtray sitting on his desk. It wasn't his ashtray; it belonged to the general who previously occupied the room. Ackerson had convinced him that he deserved the room, and the senior officer gladly gave it up.

Ackerson's door opened, and a petty officer walked in. She could barely see his face through the shadows, but she knew he had that horrible, snide look he always had on his face, and simply set a data pad on his desk. As she turned to leave she was fully aware that the Major's eyes drifted lower and lower, until her slender frame turned the corner out of view.

He knew what the message would surely say, and decided not to read it. Ackerson never really intended for his plans to work, he simply wanted to keep Dr. Halsey on her toes. He wanted to remind her that he was not someone to play around with. He wanted to make sure that she knew he was still out there.

Ackerson had originally been paired with the Doctor on the SPARTAN project. From the moment he met her he disliked her, but he tried to keep that secret. They had luckily been focused on different parts of the project, and Ackerson only had to deal with her through memos and brief meetings. Ackerson had been assigned the project through an old ONI buddy, and had been expecting great rewards upon its completion. Dr. Halsey, however, wanted only to save the UNSC from crumbling. She believed all the recruitment crap spewed by the High Brass to keep numbers up, and more men and women joining the UNSC. Ackerson knew there was no threat of rebellion, or of any real disaster.

He kept that too himself and slowly watched Dr. Halsey go about planning her little freak show. Ackerson couldn't wait for it to be over, so he could get himself a nice promotion, and then dump the project, and start on something useful. Of course, the good Doctor had something else planned entirely. Upon completion of the Spartan Is she proceeded to disobey direct ONI orders and attempted to save her precious subjects from their predetermined death. Ackerson had planned for this, and installed a toxin during one of the last augmentations. Happy his part was over Ackerson left Reach for Earth. It was only later that he learned Halsey had him kicked off the project only three months before completion, and that one of the Spartan Is had survived.

1500 Hours, November 22, 2524(Military Calendar)/

****Reach Medical Complex, Planet Reach****

Dr. Catherine Halsey adjusted her glasses and began typing in the access codes to her SPARTAN project's datafiles. Around her were several of the Artificial Intelligence units assigned to her project. Her personal A.I., Dã©ja, was examining the most recent test results, and the other A.I.s were surely also working on things related to the upcoming augmentation. The preparations of almost twenty years were coming to fruition, the SPARTAN project was nearing completion, and Halsey was extremely pleased.

The sliding doors that separated her workroom from the rest of the Complex hissed open, and Halsey's assistant walked in. When she had first met Ackerson he had been a charming, ambitious Second Lieutenant. That was five years ago, now Ackerson was a Major, and ready to pounce on anything that could get him a good word with HighCom. He had accepted the project begrudgingly, knowing full well its importance with the Brass. Halsey had often heard him call it a "freak show", but he was a helpful asset, and she was glad to have him. Ackerson had the ability to get Halsey anything she wanted, as long as she never asked where or how he got it.

Ackerson settled himself into his chair, turned on his monitor and got to work. Halsey doubted it pertained to the Project, but she was too busy to care. One of the A.I.s attempted to interact with him, but he shrugged it off and continued typing furiously. Ackerson could not seem to stay focused on one thing for more than five minutes, and Halsey could tell he was up to something new. She just hoped it didn't involve her, and went back to work.

Halsey respected Ackerson, and found him intriguing, but she still kept her distance. She knew full well that he was a dangerous man, and that the sooner he was off the project, the better.

As he turned from his monitor, and began to leave the cramped room, he was startled by the hiss of the doors opening before he reached the sensor. In the frame stood Jacob Keyes, the Naval officer who assisted Halsey while she scouted the Spartan II's. Ackerson simply brushed past him and continued walking, Keyes entered the room, and he navigated through the A.I.s to reach Halsey. She stood up to shake Keyes hand, but he simply saluted her. As Halsey awkwardly retracted her hand Keyes began to speak.

"Ma'am, I have some bad news," he told her. Keyes could tell that Halsey had yet to hear the announcement, and she did not know that Section Three had passed down the order to terminate the SPARTAN Is. Not wanting to tell her himself, Keyes directed her to the nearest computer and opened the message. Halsey's eyes darted quickly down the screen, and her expression went from bad to worse. As she stood up Keyes thought she was going to hit him. Instead, she turned to Ackerson's computer and began to enter access codes. She opened up the ghost program she had installed on Ackerson's computer, and found the last program he had been working on; sure enough, it was his Augmentation Simulator. He had added a new element, and Halsey attempted to search for it. She attempted to bring up a list of the processes, but the computer asked for a password, she opened up the ghost program and looked for the password, as it came up she began to type it into the screen, the whole room went black.

Keyes thought he heard her utter a word usually reserved for intoxicated sailors. Keyes was used to such language, but not from Halsey. He watched her in the dark as she

attempted to restore power to the network. As she slid from computer to computer on a small chair the auxiliary power came on. Small flashing red lights came to life overhead, and Keyes sat down watching her glimpse by glimpse as the red lights illuminated and faded. He couldn't help but admire her subtle beauty, and her striking personality. The Good Doctor was definitely one of a kind, Keyes thought to himself. She started typing faster, and switched between computers more often.

For ten minutes she battled the system, and there were several times when the power came on, only to short out in seconds. Finally, she got the system running again and simply put her head in her hands. Then she got up, looked at Keyes like she just realized he was there, and, with a rather suspicious smile said, "Let's go for a walk,"

"Keyes, what do you think this project is?"
>"A UNSC funded physiological study, ma'am."<p>

"I've told you many times Jake, you're horrible at lying. What do you really think all this is?" She looked deeply into his eyes and for the first time Keyes thought she earnestly cared for him.

"You're up to something, ma'am. This is some kind of genetics experiment. You've been visiting a lot of UNSC hospitals and research stations since we finished studying those kids. Now, I don't know how those kids we studied are tied into thisâ€¦oh, doctor, please don't tell me you're gonna mess with those kids. They've got so much to live for. Think of John, or Fhajad, or Sam. Are you really planning on turning them inside out for some study? What if John _died?_ Would that be worth it Doctor? What could you possibly learn that would be worth that kid's life?"

"That's what were going to find out Mr. Keyes."

11. Chapter 11

Chapter 11 1214 Hours, March 9, 2525(Military Calendar)/

****Epsilon Eridani System, Office of Naval Intelligence Medical Facility, in orbit around planet Reach****

"Ma'am, Subject Seven is suffering cardiac arrest!"

"Subject Thirty Three is reacting poorly to the calcium surface coating. Am attempting to reverse affectsâ€¦"

"Doctor, Number Fifty Three is overdosing on the optical enhancement solution."

"Eighty Two failed to come out of the coma. I called it at 0307 hours."

"Doctor, are you listening?"

"Of course DÃ©ja. I'm working on Fhajad now. I'll help the others when I'm done."

"I project that four of the children will die in that time period, and Subject Fhajad will still suffer irreversible damage to his nervous system."

"I know that DÃ©ja, but he _will_ live. As for the others, I'm concentrating on those most likely to survive."

"With the inclusion of number Eighty Two, the list of fatalities has risen to sixteen."

"Thank you Dã@ja, please check on Sam, Kelly, and John."

"All three of those subjects are within accepted parameters."

"Good. Are any of the subjects finished?"

"Negative. Number One Seventeen is furthest along, requiring only minor augmentations and the follow up injections."

"Doctor, Number Seven didn't make it."

"Thank you. Dã@ja, are any living subjects in critical condition?"

"Negative, most are in stable condition between augmentations."

With that, the good doctor let out a great sigh and collapsed in a nearby chair. She had been on her feet for seventeen hours and awake for fifty. Sixteen dead this far in was better than she had predicted, but still not good enough. It started to look like some were going to make it after all. John was almost out of the woods, and that's good. No. She checked that. "For the thousandth time, I can't get attached," she thought aloud. Then Halsey got up and leaned on the row of monitors in front of the window. Below, seventy-five bubbles contained seventy-five children in various stages of augmentation. Sixteen of those bubbles had become tombs, and a good number more would join them. But the rest would contain the hopes of the future. After all, that's why we're doing this, she thought, to preserve the future. To sacrifice a few to save many. "Well, no amount of philosophizing is going to save these kids," she stated to no one in particular. "Dã@ja, which subject is in the worst condition?"

"Number Thirty Three, Doctor."

"Thank you Dã@ja." And with that, the doctor headed to operating station thirty-three to aid the doctors there. She continued this pattern for another twenty-two hours before each candidate was either safe or dead. Then, and only then, she slept.

12. Chapter 12

****Chapter 12****

0600 Hours, April 05, 2525(Military Calendar)/ UNSC Carrier _Atlas_, on patrol in the Lambda Serpentis system

Doctor Halsey entered the Spartan's barracks on the _Atlas _escorted by the ODST Fred instantly recognized from their training field on Reach. "Attention." John shouted to the group as he noticed Halsey.

"You know that's unnecessary John."

"Yes ma'am, I do."

"Any way, I would like you all to meet someone. If the UNSC were your father and the SPARTAN program were your mother, this man would be

your older brother."

Fred thought about this. Doctor Halsey was the closest thing any of them had to a mother, and if this ODST was from the SPARTAN program, then, maybe the Doctor was his mother too. Clearly they all shared the same father. This man had probably been in the UNSC since the Spartans were born. But did that make this man their brother? Fred just didn't know.

"CPO Mendez informed me you have seen what Lieutenant Simmons can do, and since you have just undergone the same augmentation he already received, you'll find you can achieve similar results, if you're willing to listen. The Lieutenant has agreed to help you overcome the side effects of the augmentation process during the coming weeks."

So that's how this man had beaten Kelly. He was a Spartan like them. No, he wasn't like them. He was just one man; they were a team. Still, if he could help them get over this awkwardness they had been going through, then Fred was willing to listen to him.

Over the next few weeks, this ODST was there every morning to help with the calisthenics and though he didn't say much to the Spartans, he would occasionally whisper something to CPO Mendez who would then alter the normal exercises to better suit the augmented Spartans. Fred found that calisthenics was the only time he could actually think coherently, so he decided to spend the time analyzing this new, threat wasn't the right word, snag was more appropriate. John said anything they hadn't trained for was a snag, and they had never trained for people to hover around their activities. The only person who took an interest in them and wasn't on their team was Dr. Halsey. After the first day, Fred had only managed to categorize the man. He was not a threat, and he was not one of the team, but he was a superior officer. As such, Fred extended him every courtesy. Though Dr. Halsey clearly wished them to think so, this man was not a member of the Spartan family. He was a help, and he seemed to like them, but he was not their brother. During sparring, this was the only person who could fight with a Spartan without suffering serious injury. He would teach them moves as Chief Mendez yelled out orders and counter moves. For two weeks, nobody could touch the ODST, but one day Fred actually got a hit on the man. He then succeeded in getting his rear end handed to him, but it was a start. One day, the Chief began the day with an announcement. "Lieutenant Simmons will no longer be exercising with us. Otherwise, we will continue as we were. Now, jumping jacks. Begin." And with that the ODST was gone again from their lives. What they didn't know, is where he had gone.

UNSC Priority Transmission 09906H-98

****Encryption Code: **Green**

****Public Key:** le/excised access Omega/**

****From:** Major James Ackerson, Research Officer, UNSC HighCom**

****To:** Dr. Catherine Elizabeth Halsey M.D., Ph.D., special civilian consultant (civilian Identification Number: 10141-026-SRB4695)**

****Subject:**** You Know

****Classification:**** ACCESSABLE (BGX Directive)

Catherine,

Let's get down to it. You want to test your gear and I want to take out the installation. It benefits both of us. The brass will be pleased with both of us and we'll probably get a nice grant each. I bet you think I'm trying to scam you, but remember, even if I am, you can't lose.

Ackerson

1200 Hours, April 27, 2525(Military Calendar)/ UNSC Carrier Atlas, in orbit around the third planet in the Lambda Serpentis system

"All right Lieutenant, here's the plan. You'll insert via drop pod and proceed as quietly as possible to the outskirts of the settlement. You'll meet a contact there named Matthias. He'll direct you to the explosive cache we planted a while back. All you have to do is keep the contact to a minimum and plant the charges on the installation's fuel deposits." With that the General turned off his pointer and the holographic maps disappeared from view automatically. The ONI Captain in the corner shifted in his seat. Why do all the ONI spooks I meet seem nervous all the time? Simmons thought. Do they know something I don't, or are they just paranoid?

"General, if you don't mind me asking, why are you doing it this way? Wouldn't a team of troops be better suited to this mission? What can one man do?"

Marines don't like the idea of being alone in enemy territory.

"Now listen here son. I've seen my share of action and one man can do a lot. We're doing it this way because it's the only way to convince their scanners down there that we haven't sent any troops downside. We're gonna drop you during a trash dump. The debris will cover your landing and convince the rebels we're about to jump system. The ruse should last three hours, but then time's up. A Pelican and two Longswords come in guns blazing to the LZ and get out in minimum time. If you're not there, you're a permanent resident of the Thatcher colony. Now, I know I'm missing somethingâ€¦let me seeâ€¦oh yeah the suit. Now everyone in this room knows you're not just an average ODST. As such, HIGHCOM has chosen you to test the new ODST Drop-suit Mark VIII."

While the General continued the brief, the ONI spook became increasingly edgy and a Private with a box in his hands entered the room. After the General finished, he said apologetically, "I'm sorry sir, I musta got the wrong box. This one says 'Mah-jol-ner'."

The spook Captain wiped his hand across his face and the General exclaimed "Private, if I want you to read something, I'll tell you what it says. Just put the box down on the table and return to your duty station." As the Private left the room rather quickly the General picked up the box and beckoned for Simmons to follow him. They went to the ship's port hangar, which was being used as a warehouse for the food and other supplies being transported to the

UNSC-controlled section of the Thatcher colony. Boxes lined the area, but a fair space had been cleared out. The General put the box down in the middle of the open space and then the ONI man appeared from the shadows and started unloading the box.

In aside to the General, Simmons asked, "How did he get here before us, sir?"

"When it comes to ONI spooks, it's best not to ask." The younger officer took the advice and nodded slyly. Then the unexpected happened. The ONI man actually came over and talked to Simmons.

Shaking his hand the man said, "I'm Captain T. Aaron from ONI research. I'm not really a spook, more of a technician. In the unlikely event that you survive and we need you again for further testing, I'll be right here to hold your hand again." He made a sweeping gesture towards the now out folded suit. "This is the ODST suit, Mark VIII. Chances are it'll never see service again. It's a might expensive. As you can see it's much different from the suit you're used to. It is sealed from vacuum completely and can recycle air for 20 minutes if necessary. It consists of a body glove, some armor plates, and the helmet. In a minute, you're gonna put it on and try it out before they shoot you out into space. Any questions?"

"Why are the plates green and reflective?"

"It's a new armor we've been working on. Trust me, it's great."

"What's on the backpack? It looks like a small reactorâ€|"

"No, no. Don't be silly. Just a big battery. Suit uses a lot of power. Whatta you say we get started, ok?" In fifteen minutes, Simmons was set up in the "ODST Drop-suit, Mark VIII" though he now doubted that's what its real designation was. When he first moved around, he realized it was as if he were moving in double time. He also noticed the HUD was considerably better than his current helmet's. Ammo counter, health meter, aiming reticule, and a circle with yellow dots. "What's the cirâ€|?"

"Motion tracker. I figure it'll come in handy on this op." Aaron had apparently heard him, though Simmons didn't remember opening a radio channelâ€| "The suit is kind of in your implant interpreting your thoughts. That's why you're moving so fast and the radio channel opened on its own. It's complicated, but you'll like it. Now move around a bit and then we'll get you in that poorly designed entry vehicle of yours."

"Why do you hate the Drop Pods so much?"

"My design was second place for that contract. None were ever made. That was my first project, and I was sure mine was better. Now I just take it out on you Rocket Jockeys. Now get going."

The newly enhanced Simmons moved faster than he could have thought possible. He leaped way over the boxes scattered about, and on a whim, punched one. It sailed across the hangar, but that's to be expected in zero gees. But this hangar was on the rotating section,

operating at one gee. Before Simmons had a chance to think about it, he was ushered to the HEV pods and crammed in. Before he was jettisoned he heard Aaron's voice saying "Good luck, you're gonna need it." Then all he could hear was the firing of the positional rockets, and then later, the whistling of reentry.

1507 Hours, April 27, 2525(Military Calendar)/ On the Outskirts of the Thatcher Colony

The headache from the rough landing was finally going away. Some idiot techie had forgot to compensate for the weight of the new suit and Simmons had run out of retrorocket fuel seven second early. That may not seem like a lot, but it meant the drop pod hit the ground 20 feet per second faster than normal. As any ODS who's been shortchanged retro fuel will tell you, that hurts. For the first thirty seconds after hitting the ground, Simmons was in a daze, but Aaron's voice over the radio brought him back to reality. "Wake up sunshine."

"I'm up, I'm up."

"Sorry about that hard landing, those drop pod techies are idiots."

"How'd you know about that?"

"Aside from the satellite feed, the radio monitoring, and the health monitors in the suit? I realized we never compensated for the extra weight."

"Thanks."

"Anyways, proceed South-Southwest for two kilometers and you'll be at the meeting spot."

"Why are we using a contact? Why not just tell me where the explosives are?"

"I don't know. I think this guy has some UNSC contacts and he wanted some excitement. You know what, I'll find out for you. Let's seeâ€|ex-Marine, Special Forces, intelligence. Whoa, this guy's seventy years old! What does he want to get all caught up in this stuff for?"

"I thought you said you didn't know anything about this?"
>"I didn't. I hacked his file."<p>

"You hacked a file in the UNSC database that fast?"

"Yeah, I've been doing it since I was fifteen."

"Interesting, anything else?"

"Yeah, the suits doing fine. I think you'll really enjoy trying it out. We've gotâ€|seventy four seconds until radio silence, any more questions?"

"No, I'm good here. I'll report after I've been recovered at the LZ."

"If you make it to the LZ."

"Thanks for the optimism."

But Aaron didn't reply. The satellites had moved out of range and now, aside from Mathias, Lieutenant Matthew Simmons was the only UNSC friendly entity for a couple hundred kilometers.

After proceeding the prescribed two kilometers southwest, Simmons came upon a house resting on a hill with plenty of tress providing shade. It seemed an oasis in the barren lands that surrounded it. Having visited the deserts in New Mexico, the Lieutenant was forced to note how similar the two were. As he marveled in the odd beauty of the plateaus, a voice rang out beside him.

"Quite beautiful, aren't they?" In a flash Simmons had drawn and leveled the silenced MA2B he was issued for this operation. Aside from the knife sheathed to his calf, it was his only weapon, and he was hesitant to expend any of its precious ammo. Instead of an enemy soldier, a man of considerable age stood before him with a cane. He was clearly at one time a man among men, easily six and a half feet tall and his frame showed signs of having once been stacked to the brim with muscle.

"Who are you?" Simmons asked, though in his heart he knew the answer already.

"I'm a lot of things to a lot of people. To the General that sent you here, I'm that old pain in the ass. To you and the people of the Thatcher colony, I'm ol' Mathias the hermit. To Dr. Catherine Halsey, I'm a friend."

"You know Doctor Halsey?"

"I'm the one that first put the idea of a pinpoint strike force into her head. Which brings us back to business. If you've got half a brain this whole op's been weird to you. Here's why. I wanted one more op before I die, Doctor Halsey wanted to test her suit and get you a teacher, and Major James Ackerson wants this installation destroyed. What I'm supposed to teach you in three hours, I don't know, but Catherine never does anything without something in mind. As for Ackerson, it was his assignment to get rid of this place without making it an obvious UNSC job, and he figured he'd try to kill you off in the process."

"What do I have to do with it?"

"Kid, you're in this thing up to your eyeballs. Your best chance is to do this thing well, so the brass gets used to the idea of a one man strike team blowing crap up."

"Ok, we're getting off track, where are the explosives?"

"I've got 'em right here." With that he opened up his overcoat and revealed some 15 kgs of plastic explosive. "Don't worry, if you know where to put 'em, it'll be enough to do the job."

"I suppose you know the place?"

"Yep. Lets get started."

The pair walked another three kilometers southwest to the fringes of the rebel base's security. "Now, a history lesson. In 2517, the commander of the UNSC Thatcher colony turned tail. He woke up one day, changed all the flags and said that was that. His second in command, along with half the people here didn't like that, and they fought until the colony was split down the middle. Four years ago I was commissioned to observe the rebel faction of the colony and find a weakness we could exploit. We wanted to make it look like they crumbled internally instead of being brutally put down, you see. Well, a month ago I found the spot they were looking for and they dropped me the explosives and told me to expect you. Now, all you gotta do is sneak past one hundred and thirty four guards between you and the fuel cache. I've done a lot of ops in my day, but none so crazy as this. I hope that fancy suit is as good as it looks. This is where we part company. Good luck kid."

And then Simmons was left alone again. The idea was to not get seen. The brick wall was about eight feet tall, so Simmons hoped to jump up and see what he could see. He jumped up and soon realized he had actually jumped clean over the wall. He scrambled for cover on the other side and soon he was up against a shed. His motion tracker recorded one contact maybe two meters away, making his rounds. Simmons readied himself and as soon as the man rounded the corner of the shed, a green flash of lightning had pulled him in and before he had his neck snapped his assassin realized the force of the blow had already done the job. Since he realized his position was secure, Simmons tried to recall the layout of the base. Even as he racked his brains, the very map appeared on his HUD. This new suit was looking better all the time. After surveying the map for a route, he decided the best course of action was to take out the sniper in the guard post and make a run for the fuel depot. His bag contained an optic probe that connected to his helmet, and even linked to his firing reticule. After snaking the probe around the corner he fired a silent three round burst. Simmons had shot a man two hundred meters away, without ever setting eyes on him.

He immediately pulled out the probe and secured it in his bag. Then he ran faster than any human being had ever run, thanks to the suit and the augmentations, and reached the depot in a time that would make an Olympic sprinter ashamed. Regretfully, the sniper in the post fell forward rather than backward, falling five meters out of the tower to the ground. This called attention to the green flash running amok and one guard managed to get a three round burst off. Simmons realized he'd been hit, and waited for the pain, but it never came. The new armor totally absorbed the shot, which was more than Simmons could have hoped for.

As soon as he reached the fuel tanks, Simmons deployed the explosives, and ran for the nearest stretch of wall. He jumped clean over the gates and fired a few shots to cover his escape. An old M-10 LRV 'Pig' came blazing around the corner to chase the intruder. Simmons considered this a secondary concern to the eminent explosion. Only the guards who were eager enough to chase Simmons escaped the fireball that engulfed the majority of the base. Three of them were rewarded in their efforts with bullets from the MA2B the lone Marine was firing. Now it was just Simmons and the two men in the LRV. The old machine gun fired just as the ODS took a square position and fired his weapon. Both the gunner and the Marine were hit, but only one was wearing an experimental suit of body armor. The driver bugged

out, which left Simmons free to turn tail before reinforcements arrived. A quick six-kilometer jog put Simmons in the LZ and, as promised, a Pelican and two Longswords flew in fast and hot to the LZ, only to find there was nothing to shoot. It was a fast ascent and the expected anti aircraft fire never came.

Once safely on board the _Atlas _again, Simmons expected to have the clumsy suit taken off so could sleep. He couldn't have been more wrong. The suit was taken off by a more than excited Tlumack, who couldn't help asking numerous questions about the suit's function. Then there was a lengthy debriefing and the General demanded that Simmons smoke a cigar with him. By 0200 hours, Simmons was just making his way back to his bunk. As he was changing into his PT shorts and looking forward to the forty-eight hours of liberty he was promised, a voice behind him startled him into falling over and knocking his knee.

"You did well Lieutenant."

"You don't have much in the way of social skills, do you doctor?" he said with a grimace.

"I don't find it a problem. Your performance today was better than expected, since most of the people involved expected you to die. Still, you did manage to get shot. Twice. Though the armor took the hits. You may have realized everyone here in the world of black ops has an agenda, and I came to assure you that mine is to ensure your safety. Well, at least I'll do what I can. My prime objective is to 'secure the stability of the UNSC', and that's why I started the Spartan program. The Spartan II's will be an ideal strike force and hopefully they can prevent civilian casualties. You, on the other hand are one man. I didn't plan it that way, but it may be for the best. Your successors are young, and they operate best as a team. Only John and Linda seem to have the capacity for operating at full effectiveness alone. You, however seem to savor your solitude. With your success today the brass will, in all probability, want you to conduct similar missions from time to time. Just think about what you learned today, and I have faith you'll be fine. Goodbye Lieutenant."

"Goodbye ma'am." And with that, the good doctor made her exit. Simmons noted, for perhaps the thousandth time, how elegant Dr. Catherine Halsey could be when she wanted to. With that thought, the tired Marine was allowed to drift to sleep.

13. Chapter 13

****Chapter 13****

0600 Hours, April 28, 2525(Military Calendar)/

****UNSC Carrier _Atlas_, on patrol in the Lambda Serpentis system****

"Ma'am, you realize its 6 am and I'm on liberty, right?" Doctor Halsey seemed to have taken an officer's quarters on the ship, and a high-ranking officer at that.

"I appreciate the time, and how precious it is to you. I brought you

here to tell you a few things. Firstly, you really helped the Spartan II's with their training, and I would appreciate your obliging me again on occasion. As such, you and your unit have been reassigned to Reach permanently. When the Spartan II's go on a mission, you men will be following them. You are, in effect, on Spartan duty. I want your men to be the best unit in the Marine Corps, since you'll be backing up the best unit in the Navy. When the Spartans need to train with a Marine unit in support that will be your men by their sides. Other units will be used as adversary units; your men will only ever be friendly. I want the Spartans to associate with you as an extension of their unit. Are your men up to it?"

"Of course ma'am. What kind of training are we looking at? What kind of missions?"

"Anything and everything Lieutenant. Your men have to be as versatile as the Spartans themselves. I'm attempting to acquire men to reinforce your platoon, and if all this works out, you will be promoted. As soon as we get back to Reach, we'll finally get to see if the Spartan project was worthwhile."

"Ok ma'am. I'm really looking forward to it. Anything else?"

"Let me see—oh yes, the missions. The Spartans will be a pinpoint strike force; your men will be their backup. If you engage in unit-to-unit fighting, it means the mission is going south. You should teach your men a considerable deal more field medicine than usual. I'll help you with that. That should be all for now Lieutenant. Thank you for your time."

As the Doctor showed Simmons out, he realized life was gonna get tougher before it got better. He planned it out in his head: three days with the unit, three days with the Spartans, one day R&R. He sat down at his computer and sent a message to O'Donnell and Dominique to get the men on the best physical fitness regime in the Corps. He started booking ranges in advance for training and he acquired as much new gear as his clearance would allow. Drops were expensive, so they couldn't practice that, but they could practice insertion by Pelicans, and Simmons saw the squadron working the field next to them was the Twenty Third. 'That's my brother's unit.' Simmons thought. 'That'll be great, but it might cause trouble.' He was actually looking forward to seeing his brother again despite the problems it might cause. 'No, wait, they'll be gone before I get back. Oh well, crisis averted.' It seemed the Twenty Third was operating off the cruiser Pillar of Autumn. What a crappy name.

0600 Hours, May 4, 2525(Military Calendar)/ Epsilon Eridani System, UNSC Military Reservation 01478-B, planet Reach

"Painland" had practically become home to Simmons' men since the time he arrived back on Reach. They had trained on every conceivable squad based weapon in the UNSC arsenal, and a few some rebel factions were using. The fitness regimen was enough to get even Simmons sweating at times, and only Dominique seemed to be taking it in stride. The LT had been back just four days, and each one resulted in every member of the team collapsing on the ground. On this particular morning, Simmons patrolled the area directly behind the shooters and listened to the squad Sergeants shout orders and insults. What the men didn't know is that the shooting was just the beginning today. They were going to start working on the Warthogs today, and O'Donnell said he

was really looking forward to it.

"Alright ladies, let's get going for the depot, it's just a quick six mile jog," As the statement started, the men cheered the LT for idea of using the vehicles and resting their weary feet, but their method of travel to the depot was met with considerable discord. "First things first, put on the MILES gear." The only voice that could pierce the deafening groans that followed was Dominique's.

"Sir, that gear weighs eighteen pounds and the men are fully loaded already," he said, with sincere concern for the men entrusted to him.

"I'm aware of the weight of the gear Sergeant, we need to practice with it, and when it's gone, you thank me." Little did they know there was a combat exercise planned, and it was to be the first time 89th Drop Jet Platoon (Reinforced) would support the Spartans in a combat situation.

After the "quick jog", the men spent five minutes drinking water and fighting over who would get which Warthog, with the drivers analyzing every feasible aspect, including paint jobs and numbers. Simmons waited for them to finish, then assigned them to the Warthogs on the other side of the depot, which were also equipped with the MILES gear. Before the men had time to think about what all this simulation gear could mean, Simmons gave the word to go. After a mile, the roads ended and the Marines were on open fields next to Reach's famous forests. Simmons was reminded of the Midwest back on Earth. The green rolling grass covered the green rolling hills and blew softly in the wind. The trees formed a giant oval around the field, and if Simmons hadn't known what was coming, he would have stopped to enjoy the scenery. Tango Company's barracks were just a mile to the northwest, and Simmons was wary of irregular movements in the trees. He was expecting the Spartans at any moment, and he didn't have to wait long.

A single Warthog came blazing out of the woods with three occupants. The driver and gunner seemed to be 18 year old guys who had "borrowed" their ROTC's 'Hog to take out their girlfriend. Then Simmons squinted and saw they were all wearing fatigues, and their "girlfriend" was holding what appeared to Tango Company's flag in the side seat. "Prepare to open fire!" Simmons shouted to his men, then put the call out on his radio. The men were aiming at the single Warthog, when a dozen more came chasing the first, and the men started picking individual targets. Then a Scorpion barreled out at full speed to close off the Warthog's escape. The Scorpion fired its main gun and the gunner of the lead 'Hog waited for the explosion that would follow.

It never came. All three-dozen vehicles on the field had been equipped with the simulation gear and were firing blanks. Even the tank. "The 'Hog with the flag is a friendly. All other targets are enemies. Form a square around the flag 'Hog and proceed to eliminate all Tango Company targets." For the next twenty-seven minutes, thirty-five LRV's and one MBT duelled on a field a mile wide and twenty miles long. When a vehicle sustained enough simulated 'shots' the engine would shut down, and that vehicle would be out of the fight. Simmons' men had lost four 'Hogs to Tango Company's nine by the time they had gone half way down the field. The tank accounted for three of the 89th's losses, but O'Donnell had taken it out with

his rocket launcher. In simulation only, of course.

The battle ended when Tango's CO drove his vehicle a little too close to the center of the square and O'Donnell blew him figuratively into the stratosphere. After that, the guns started to quiet, and the men realized there was nothing else to shoot at. The remainder of the platoon drove to the end of the field, where a Pelican was awaiting the three teens. "Driver, report here please."

"Sir, yes sir! Spartan 117 reporting sir!"

"At ease soldier. Just a few questions before you go. How did you guys get Tango's flag?"

"It was our mission, sir."

"I know that, but how did you get it?"

"I don't think CPO Mendez would like it if I disclosed tactical information so loosely, sir," the young man said with a grin.

"Fine. Who are your friends there? I'd like to meet them."

"Sir, yes sir. This is Spartan 087, Kelly and Spartan 104, Fred. Over under the trees there is Linda, number 058," as he spoke he pointed to a shady spot, where another teenage girl came out into the light.

"You guys must be pretty good. I didn't see you there, Linda." The girl cringed at the sound of her name, as if it made her vulnerable to hear her name spoken aloud.

"Thank you sir," she whispered. Simmons was admiring the fact that she could carry, much less aim, the SRS99C-S2 in her arms.

"Umâ€¦ I don't know how to say this sir, but you're one of a very select group of people outside the team that knows our names. Dr. Halsey says its okay for you and your men to know, but it makes us feel kinda weird." The teen showed his first real uneasiness, shifting his weight and looking nervous. Throughout the fake conflict, the Spartans had show incredible cool under fire, even if it was simulated.

"I understand. Well, don't keep Chief Mendez waiting. Send him my regards Spartan."

"Sir, yes sir." With that the Spartans jogged off to the drop ship with their new prize, and as they flew off, Simmons and his men drove the Warthogs all the way back to the barracks, where the men were happy to hear they had the rest of the day off, provided they cleaned the spent shells out of their vehicles.

14. Chapter 14

****Chapter 14****

0900 Hours, May 7, 2525(Military Calendar)/ Epsilon Eridani System, Reach Military Complex, planet Reach

The Naval Officer's Academy was a strange scene to most of the men, but to Simmons it was like a homecoming. He hadn't been to the famous Reach academy, but he was looking forward to it. The majority of the NCOs were bemused and took in the sights, while the privates just whistled and commented on the Navy's digs. Simmons walked up the stairs and was forced to block his eyes from the sun as he admired the scalloped dome of the main academy building. Doctor Halsey was leaning against one of the columns, conversing with an AI in a toga.

"Morning Doctor," Simmons called out.

"Good morning Lieutenant. I hope your men are enjoying themselves," she said with a smile.

"Men! Lets bring it in!"

"Thank you. Now gentlemen, let's begin." The Good Doctor ushered them with a wave to the medical building. Most of the men hadn't sat at a desk since grade school, and the sight of Dominique squished into a chair designed for twenty year old officer hopefuls was enough to make everyone laugh. "Today's class," the doctor began, "is on battlefield medicine." A series of holographic diagrams were coming up, each suffering typical battlefield wounds, and the group was being herded by the same toga wearing AI. "This is DÃ©ja, and she'll be assisting us. Now, our first malady is a bullet wound to the abdomen from a 12.7mm round. Yes private?"

"What does all that mean ma'am?" a young member of the squad enquired.

"It means he got shot in the stomach. Now, who knows what to do first? No, not you corpsman. Anyone else? Yes, Corporal."

"Biofoam?" a Corporal timidly raised his hand.

"No, in ideal conditions, first you would remove the bullet. Good guess though. The round would be unlikely to penetrate very far, but since I doubt you have ever removed a bullet before, we'll practice that. Biofoam is next, then a field dressing. Now gather around the lab table here, and I'll show you." As she spoke, a hologram of a Sergeant with a 12.7mm pistol round in his pancreas appeared on her table. The doctor was about to begin when she was interrupted by a voice from the back.

"Shouldn't you wash your hands first, Doctor?" Simmons asked.

"Maybe you'd like to perform the operation, Lieutenant?"

"Sure thing Doctor." Simmons had failed his field medicine class back at Quantico, and was forced to take it again. He had run this particular simulation twelve times, and had received a one hundred percent on the last one. When he reached the 'body' he saw the Doctor had changed the program. The ribs were coated with some weird gel, and the vital signs were super charged. It was a simulated Spartan. It was a subtle difference, but Fiurah noticed. Simmons motioned this to Doctor Halsey, and she took the medic from the room.

"DÃ©ja, please supervise the class for a moment."

"Of course doctor. You may begin when ready Lieutenant."

Simmons successfully treated the simulated patient, and was glad to realize the program had given him a ninety three percent. That meant the Spartan oriented medicine would still work on normal Marines.

As the Doctor reentered, she checked the score. "That's almost an 'A' Lieutenant. Very good. Does anyone else want to try? Yes, very well corpsman." Within an hour everyone had performed the operation and everyone had passed. Dominique had nearly yanked the subject's intestines out with the bullet, but he managed a seventy percent. "Alright class. Same time next week. Corpsman, Lieutenant, could I see you for a moment in my office?"

"Yes ma'am?" Simmons asked. He thought the session had gone well, but he was ready for the good doctors 'not good enough'.

"Your men performed extremely well. I'm surprised. Now, corpsman, you noticed the program's alteration extremely fast. Where did you train?"

"Oxford, ma'am. First in class. It was kind of obvious, the vital signs gave it away," he replied with a smirk.

"Very well, thank you corpsman. That is all."

"Ma'am. Sir." And with that Fiurah left the building to catch up with the men.

"You hand picked him, didn't you ma'am?"

"He was in my class for a semester. Most of the professors said he was the best they'd seen in a while. I knew he'd come in handy, so I called in a favor. You're catching on Lieutenant. But that's not why I kept you here. Tomorrow there will be another exercise. You will support the Spartans in their attempt to infiltrate Bravo Company's perimeter and retrieve their flag. Your Pelican's will be delayed and you will be forced to spend the night in the woods surrounding Bravo Company's perimeter. You and your men must insure the Spartan's safety and make sure that flag ends up on my wall here." She motioned toward the long wall of her office and it seemed her Spartans had managed to swipe at least one flag from every unit on Reach, and even a few on other planets. There was a space for Bravo Company's, so they were sure to be expecting this. "Now I don't pretend to be a tactician, but I think this would be a good opportunity for our two units to bond. I understand two man pickets are a viable strategy to spend the nightâ€¦"

"Understood ma'am."

"I'll leave the pairings up to you. Thank you Lieutenant."

"Thank you ma'am."

1557 Hours, May 8, 2525(Military Calendar)/ Epsilon Eridani System, Reach Military Complex, Immediately outside Bravo Company's installation, planet Reach

Bravo Company was lucky to get a forest like this, three kilometers from their base. It was just close enough for everyday use, just far

enough to make it a workout to get there. Simmons' men had spent the majority of the morning hiking to rendezvous point, and though the Sergeants had kept a good pace, the Spartans beat them there.

"Hi Lieutenant!" cried the nearest Spartan.

"Hi John. Hi Fred. How's the mission going?"

"Great. We've got Linda keeping an eye on the Bravo's and James is keeping the back door open. As soon as you guys are in place, we'll move out." John was clearly excited, but he was still the master of his men and his situation.

"Men! Secure this perimeter. Suppressive fire areas there andâ€¦ there. Okay John, looks like we're all set up. You can go. If you're not back in three hours, we'll come in guns blazin'."

"I doubt we'll need it sir. Fred, Malcolm, Grace. Let's go!" In thirty seconds the Spartan team was out of sight. Simmons expected them to take an hour and a half, but they were at Simmons' feet panting with the flag in forty-three minutes.

"How in the name ofâ€¦!"

"Team (pant) secret (pant) sir." John clearly enjoyed the mystery surrounding his team, and Fred didn't seem to mind it either.

"Did you (pant) miss us sir?" Fred had the flag in his hands, and a cut on his face.

"Fiurah."

"Yes sir?"

"Fix this Spartan up corpsman. John, we're heading to the LZ in five."

It took them twenty minutes to reach the LZ, and surprise surprise, the Pelicans were late. O'Donnell's voice broke the expectant silence. "LT, the airfield just called. There's some kind of fuel distribution issue, so no Pelicans tonight." The men groaned, which seemed to have become their standard response to anything that happened on an exercise. Simmons looked to John to see if he was expecting it, but it seemed to be news to him. Odd that the Doctor would tell him, but not her Spartans. "Bravo's gonna be looking for us, and this open field is not the place we want to be. Back to the ridge we passed in the forest. We can keep an eye on their movements from there. Let's go!"

The hike was a short one, and remarkably uneventful. Simmons had just remembered the Doctor's suggestion of the pickets. He was thinking how to pair everyone up when he nearly hiked past the ridge and Dominique tapped him on the shoulder and said "Uh, LT, you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Now, we're gonna have to spend the night, so let's set up some pickets. Umâ€¦ Linda, you're with Omni. Go to the best spot you can find and report on Bravo's progress every fifteen minutes. John, go with Dominique. You two are on point. Joshua, go with Fiurah. Make sure everyone's ok. Corporal McKay, meet Kelly. You

two are going to be my runners tonight. O'Donnell, take Sam and take stock of our weapons. The rest of you Spartans, just mingle in the perimeter for now. Make a friend or two, we're gonna be here a while. Oh, and Fred, you're with me." The pairs set up their perimeters and Fred made his way over to his buddy for the night.

"Hi LT."

"Hi Fred. You seem like an observant guy, so I want you to keep your eyes open so I don't have to."

"Sure thing LT."

"Do you mind if I ask you some serious questions?"

"No sir, but I can't promise you I'll answer. CPO Mendez would kill me if I told you some of the stuff I know."

"Fair enough. Do you kids have official ranks?"

"I don't think so, but John's our squad leader. CPO Mendez just calls us 'Spartans' or 'Maggots' or 'Trainees'."

"Huh. So do you guys ever do normal kid stuff? "

"You mean like target practice?"

"No, like playing games and watching vids."

"We play all kinds of games with CPO Mendez, but we always lose, and somebody usually gets hurt. And Dã©ja shows us all kinds of tactical vids in class every day."

"That's not what I meant but ok. Does Doctor Halsey usually teach you guys?"

"About half the time. She seems to go all over the place, but she never says where she's going. Sam says she's the President of the UNSC and she's got to go make big decisions, but I don't believe him."

"Hah. Now that's real kid behavior. Here's a serious question Fred. Do you like being a Spartan?"

"Yeah, its great. Doctor Halsey and CPO Mendez say were gonna defend the whole UNSC. We get to fight for the innocents everywhere, likeâ€|ourâ€|families." He stopped for a moment, and he resolved himself. "Sorry LT. I don't know what that was about. John and the guys are my family. I love being a Spartan sir, do you?"

"Do you kids consider me a Spartan?"

"James and Anton say you're not, but John and Kelly say you are. I think you're a Spartan who's just not on the team. Not that we don't want you, its just we're all the same age and stuff."

"I understand. Well, tell James and Anton no hard feelings. So is Linda your only sniper?"

"Oh, we can all snipe, but she gets the most practice and she's the

best. We're all the best at something. John's the leader, Grace is great at explosives, Anton is a scout, Li's our zero gee guy. We're all specialists."

"What are you the best at?"

"I don't knowâ€¦I guess I'm the best at being second best. I get second at everything. Every race, every range contest, everything."

"You sound like me during college. Except instead of a team always getting first, it was my friend Amacus. What was that?" A twig snapped two yards away. The nearest picket didn't hear it, but Simmons and Fred did.

"Just me LT." John's outline came into the dimming light at a crouch.

"What is it John?"

"Just wanted to report. Sergeant Dominique says the Bravo's are clueless, and I concur."

"Thanks John. Keep it up. McKay, Kelly. Go check on Omni and Linda. O'Donnell, Sam, report."

"Suppressive fields of fire are laid out. Oh, and we uh 'found' a couple extra sniper rifles. Those Bravo guys said they didn't need em anymore."

"You got some POW's?"

"Yeah, they're getting Fiurah to look at the boo boos they got when we found em. They'll be okay."

"LT, Bravos on the move. Two hundred meters to the left flank, three hundred meters distant. Request permission to open fire." Omni had assumed his cold, calculating demeanor he always had on a real mission.

"How many?"

"A patrol of fifteen, sir." Linda's voice was as cold, if not colder than Omni's.

"Can you hit em from there?"

"No problem," the two snipers answered in union.

"Open up on em."

A round fired from an SRS99C-S2 rifle will penetrate a human body with such force as to cause unbelievable damage to the entire corpse from a mile away. And corpse is the correct term, since by the time the round had done the majority of its harm, the victim is long dead. Luckily for the Bravo's, Linda and Omni were using the simulation gear.

1957 Hours, May 8, 2525(Military Calendar)/ Epsilon Eridani System, Reach Military Complex, Immediately outside the 89th Drop Jet

Platoon's perimeter, planet Reach

"Where we going Lieutenant?" a tired Bravo Lance Corporal asked.

"Shut up. They're around here somewhere." Lieutenant Silva had been tasked with taking the 105th Drop Jet Platoon and reclaiming the flag. Silva was determined to complete his objective, since Captain O'Brien was a sore loser.

"Fan out. Keep quiet. Those freak kids aren't gonna win this time." The mark John had left on Silva's conscience was not going to go away any time soon. Just as Silva gave out his advice, a private's MILES gear started ringing.

"Oh, man!"

"Get down!"

Another private started buzzing before he could move, and by the time the men had regrouped, four soldiers were ringing and out of the fight. Then Silva noticed there was a grenade at his feet and he put his fingers in his ears. Instead of having his meat torn apart, he was treated to the incessant noise that was the 'dead' siren.

"You may want to turn that off Tony." Simmons stepped out from behind a tree with his MA5B pointed at the remaining 105th Marines. Behind Simmons were all the Spartans, and half of Simmons's men.

"Yeah, thanks Matt. What are you doing here?"

"Keeping you and your men from killing the Spartans and taking back the flag."

"Looks like you did a good job. If my platoon was as old as yours, we'd be a little better trained and we'd have got that flag back."

"That's pretty bold talk for a guy who can't find the off switch to his gear."

"Its good to see you again Matt."

"Good to see you too. Sadly, I'm afraid you're a corpse now, and those two are POW's. If you gentlemen will just walk this wayâ€|"

The captured Marines were kept in the center of the square with their hands bound, and, mercifully, their ringers turned off. Silva seemed pretty ticked, but he was happy to see an old friend again. Simmons remembered the episode on the _Atlas _and wanted to see if Silva was still mad.

"Fred, c'mere."

"Yeah LT?"

"I want you to interrogate the Lieutenant there and figure out what the Bravo's are planning. Take John and double team him. Go on."

"But LT, I've never done an interrogation before."

"There's a first time for everything Fred."

"Okay. You're the Lieutenant."

As Simmons anticipated, Silva didn't take well to interrogation, much less by a couple of kids, one of whom he genuinely hated. Simmons made his rounds, and on his return found Fred and John deep in conversation with a Lance Corporal from Silva's platoon. The three were laughing as if they had been friends for years. If this really was Fred's first interrogation, he was doing a fine job of it.

"Spartans, over here please."

"Coming LT." John answered.

"What's up LT?" Fred's face betrayed his eagerness to spill what he had learned from Silva's man.

"What did you guys get out of Lieutenant Silva?"

"Nothing. He would hardly grunt at Fred and I couldn't get anything out of him." John seemed to be putting the pieces together, but Fred didn't seem to care about Silva.

"I figured that would happen. Did you find out anything at all?"

"Oh, man LT. That one guy wouldn't shut up. He told us how many, where, and when. There's gonna be a hundred man assault at dawn a hundred meters to the left of here." Fred pointed to the hill where Omni and Linda were keeping an eye out.

"What was that man's name?"

"Lance Corporal Lister. Service Numberâ€|" John answered methodically.

"It's not important. I think I'll go talk to him."

The LT went over to Linda and gave her some directions. Then Simmons meandered over to Silva, had a few words, and strolled on toward the man John and Fred had pointed out.

"Hello Lance Corporal. Here, take a glass of water."

"Thanks sir. Thanks a lot." The man was young and he was eager. But he was also dangerously naive.

"Now Lance Corporal Lister, I wanted to personally thank you for the information you gave me. Now here's a demonstration of what I'm going to do with it." He raised his hand and gave Linda and Omni the ok. Their shots rang out and hit Silva and all his men in seconds. Their gear went off, and their screams of annoyance took the smile from Lister's face. Then a great red dot from a laser sight appeared on the Lance Corporal's head.

"Do you see that, Lance Corporal?" Simmons pointed to the retching men trying to take off their beeping equipment. Lister was sweating bullets now and his face was full of the realization that he had just sold out his men, and the men of Bravo Company. Simmons brought his face close into the shaking Marine's, so that their noses were almost touching. "That is what happens when people talk. This may be an exercise, but those men are as good as dead, and it's your fault. You are in a position of authority Lance Corporal. Learn this lesson well, and teach it to the men under your command."

With that, Simmons stepped aside and a blank shot rang out, and in an instant Lance Corporal Lister was looking for his MILES's off switch with the rest of Silva's men. On his way back to the platoon's CP, Fred came running up alongside the careworn Lieutenant.

"What did you do that for LT?"

"Because Fred, people need to learn that war is serious, and there's going to be a real fight to win someday."

The young Spartan stopped walking and thought about that. His face hardened and he realized Simmons was right. From that day on, Spartan 104, Fred, never thought of war as a game again.

The Bravo's morning assault was entirely successful, resulting in the capture of the woods without a single casualty. This success was largely in part to the fact that Simmons and the men had already been picked up by the morning's first Pelicans. The Spartans rode in a separate Pelican to a separate installation, and Linda was tempted to take down a few Bravos from the air, but under Simmons' orders John held her back.

Silva and his men were untied and Silva was chewed out thoroughly by his superior, and in turn Silva chewed Lister out. And so the last uncaptured flag on Reach fell to the Spartans and the 89th Drop Jet Platoon.

15. Chapter 15

****Chapter 15****

1200 Hours, May 15, 2525(Military Calendar)/

****Epsilon Eridani System, Reach Military Complex, Planet Reach****

The amphitheater at the Naval Academy on Reach was packed with young men and women filled with the excitement that follows the tough times at the academy. In the back sat a Lieutenant who was reminiscing of his own times at the academy. After Simmons' graduation, Dr. Halsey was waiting for him and Amacus. Now it was the other way around.

"â€|You have done all that we asked and more. I congratulate you all on your success." Dr. Halsey sat down and the announcer resumed the ceremony.

"Valedictorian," he droned, "Ensign Fhajad." The crowd cheered and the shaking ex-Spartan was wheeled to the stage. After the excruciatingly long list of names and the throwing of the hats, the

newly christened Ensigns and Second Lieutenants were dismissed.

"I'm surprised to see you here Lieutenant." Dr. Halsey had spotted Simmons from the stage and sought him out.

"Why should you be surprised, you sent for Me."?

"I thought you'd have been sick of me and my summons by now. Oh, Lieutenant, I think you know Ensign Fhadjad." She gestured to the Spartan she had been conversing with before she found Simmons.

Simmons saluted promptly and replied, "Congratulations Ensign."

"Thank you sir," he replied as he returned the salute to the best of his ability. Then he turned and resumed his conversation with the Doctor. "You need to delay the tests ma'am. The CPU interface and the optical crystal aren't ready yet. You'll probably kill the subjects."

Simmons had no idea what they were talking about, but this was obviously an appeal to the Doctor's conscience, which must be going mad lately, since he calculated her personal death toll at fifty odd subjects killed, a dozen wounded. _How can she sleep at night?_ Simmons wondered. If she had a conscience, she had it under control.

"Nonsense Fhadjad. The AI simulations say it's going to work. And the Lieutenant here is going to prove it."

"What is it now Doctor?" he asked with a grin.

"I need you to test my Mjolnir armor again," she said in a whisper, though there's no way anyone could hear them over the chattering cadets.

"Again? I _knew_ that wasn't an ODST drop suit. What is the Mjolnir armor for then?" He was eager to fill in the gaps in his limited knowledge.

"It's for the Spartans. But maybe, if you're good, I'll let you keep one." Her usual sarcasm was laced with something else. There, just behind her eyes. What was that? Apprehension? Fear? Simmons didn't think the Doctor was capable of such emotions.

"Don't do it Lieutenant. You might live to regret it. Oh, before I forget, can I ask you a question sir? If you could select any field in the Navy, what would you pick?"

"A friend asked me that once. My answer's still the same. Astrogation."

"I can't serve aboard a ship sir, but thanks any way. Maybe I'll do astrophysics" Fhadjad then left to celebrate with his fellow cadets.

"Do you accept my offer Lieutenant? I think you'll enjoy it."

"Fine Doctor. I'm in. I'm glad you asked my opinion this time

though."

"We'll be in touch Lieutenant." With that, Doctor Halsey turned on her heel and slipped into the crowd.

1600 Hours, May 15, 2525(Military Calendar)/

Epsilon Eridani System, Reach Military Complex, Planet Reach

"And be sure to keep them on the fitness regimen."

"No prob LT," Dominique answered.

"Oh, and if you see the Spartans again, use the same pairs as last time."

"Ok boss," O'Donnell replied.

Simmons was busy packing as he gave his orders out. The Doctor had given him six hours notice. Six hours. What was she thinking? As Simmons mused, Omni poked his head in the door.

"Hey boss, can I say something? Its about yesterday."

"Yes Marine?"

"Its that Spartan girl, Linda. She's amazing boss. She can see a grasshopper on a twig four hundred meters away, and if you asked her to, I think she could hit it. I've never seen anything like it sir."

"While we're on the topic, I think Sam knows more about those weapons than I doâ€¦" O'Donnell thought out loud.

"John's no pushover either Lieutenant," Dominique chimed in.

"Well, I'm glad you guys like the Spartans. We're going to be seeing a lot of them." With that Simmons waved off his men and hopped in his Warthog on his way to Fairchild Airfield.

The MP's at the gate checked Simmons' identification and thumbprint and he was ushered in. "Proceed to the passenger's terminal Lieutenant."

"Thank you Marine." It turned out the 'Passenger Terminal' was a single prefab barracks, since the airfield specialized in fighter aircraft. In the terminal, Simmons sat down next to an eager young Second Lieutenant, who may well have graduated just hours ago.

"Sir!" the eager young Marine shouted.

"At ease," Simmons said as he returned the salute.

"You headed to the _Midsummer Night _too sir?"

"How'd you know?"

"I think that's the only outbound Pelican from here today."

"Very observant Lieutenant. What are you doing on the ship kid?"

"I can't tell you sir. My objective is classified."

"I get a lot of that. Well, looks like its time to go." The viewscreen flashed 'Pelican Romeo Thirty Six Departing' and Simmons and the new Marine ran out to the awaiting drop ship. Romeo Thirty Six was sitting on the pad outside the barracks burning its jets, and Simmons was forced to crouch up to the rear of the aircraft.

"Sir! I'm Chief Sanchez, and this is the direct route to the _Midsummer Night! _Take a seat and we'll be off in a minute!" The Chief made last minute checks while Simmons and the Second Lieutenant strapped themselves into the crash seats and attached their duffels to the recessed D-rings in the floor. The door to the cabin was sealed, and Chief Sanchez was forced to ride in the back. As he cycled the hatch closed, the pilot's voice came over the ship's intercom.

"Romeo Thirty Six to Fairchild Control. Taking off from pad 9 and using orbital ascent pattern Delta."

"Roger Romeo Thirty Six, radar is clear, you're green to go."

"The Captain likes to put the radio traffic over the intercom, so the passengers know what's going on. It really helps the nervous fliers." Sanchez explained. It appeared the young man next to Simmons was one of those nervous fliers.

"What's your name kid?" Simmons asked.

"Lieutenant Roy, sir." The young kid seemed about to lose his lunch right there at 50,000 feet, but he held it together.

"This your first trip to orbit Lieutenant?" The Crew Chief asked.

"Uh huh. Ohhâ€¦"

"My first time up, I blew chunks as soon as we hit zero gees. It floated around the cabin the rest of the flight, and it was a pain to clean, let me tell you." Apparently Sanchez had prepared this story for just such an occasion. The concept of cleaning floating vomit didn't appeal to Roy, so he resolved to hold it in.

2000 Hours, May 15, 2525(Military Calendar)/ UNSC Frigate _Midsummer Night_. Exiting the Epsilon Eridani System en route to the Chi Ceti system

Halsey seemed to have a habit of taking large quarters on board ships. She must have taken the XO's quarters this time. Simmons was surprised when Lieutenant Roy followed him to Halsey's room. If Halsey hadn't said he was allowed in, the senior Marine would have accused him of being a spy. Of the three other occupants of the room, only one was a stranger to Simmons. He wore a Navy Lieutenant's uniform with the name 'Keyes' embroidered perfectly.

"Lieutenants, this is Lieutenant Keyes. He'll be our Navy

correspondent on this mission. Upon arrival on Chi Cheti 4, we will proceed to the installation and test the equipment as quickly as possible and get you back to your units. I don't want to risk any information being leaked, so we will not discuss the matter any further while on board. The whole ordeal should take two standard weeks, round trip. Thank you gentlemen, that will be all." Halsey ushered them out of the room and closed the door practically in their faces.

"Sirs, I'm still not feeling well, so if you'll excuse me." Roy proceeded quickly down the corridor in search of a head.

"Let me guess, his first time in orbit?" Keyes asked the Marine.

"That's what he said. Have you known Dr. Halsey long sir?" Simmons asked.

"I think she'd tell me that information's classified. But yeah, I've known her a while. You?"

"Long enough. Any idea what this escapade is about?"

"No, she likes to be dramatic. Do you know this new Lieutenant Roy?"

"No. I don't know what he's here for, but I'm sure the Good Doctor has her reasons." Though Simmons was several inches taller than the swabbie, this man Keyes was still an intimidating presence. He had an aura of command about him, and the Marine guessed it was his quarter's Halsey had taken.

"What do you do on ship sir?"

"I'm the second in command. Commander Wallace needs someone to sit in his chair while he naps. What do you do on land Lieutenant?"

"I command a platoon of ODST's sir. Best in the Corps."

"ODST's huh. You must be darn good Lieutenant Simmons. Come see me around 0600 tomorrow in the Officer's Mess and we'll trade stories about the 'Good Doctor' as you called her."

"I'd like that sir."

Simmons and Keyes spent the week becoming better acquainted, and by the time they reached Chi Cheti they were the best of friends. While the Doctor was their original topic, they soon moved on to the academy, astrogation, and battlefield tactics. Keyes was glad for information on the fledgling ODST program, and Simmons enjoyed hearing tales from the bridge. Keyes said he never saw Lieutenant Roy, but Simmons saw him every morning in the gym.

Considering how much time he spent in the gym, the Lieutenant seemed the perfect specimen of a normal Marine. He wasn't big but he wasn't small. He seemed neither fast nor slow. Simmons called in a favor and had Aaron hack his file. Second Lieutenant Jason Roy graduated exactly in the middle of his class at the academy, and scored the median score on all his PT tests. He was typical in every way. Halsey had found _the_ average Marine. She had procured the perfect guinea

pig.

End
file.